Two Years

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Two Years

by BannSee

Summary

Set two years after the events of Boots.

Sergeant Sullivan never went AWOL. Instead he stuck it out and saw the charges against him dismissed.

Two years down the line, in Mogadishu, Cameron Cope marches back into his life.

Chapter 1: Chapter one

It was late when he got back to base.
It was even later when he hit the outdoor showers, to wash off the stale sweat and dirt - souvenirs of a day spent out in the desert. Somalia was hot - scorching hot, and even the nights could be warm and clammy. Tonight was one of those nights, and Sullivan felt hot and sticky again by the time he reached his barrack tent.

'Yo, Bobby,' a voice called out quietly, careful not to disturb the men actually getting some shut eye. Rob hadn't been on aid rotation today, but instead of catching up on sleep he was up, waiting for Sullivan to get back, sprawled out in one of the crappy folding camping chairs scattered outside of the tent.

Sullivan broke out in a sweat that had nothing to do with the weather as his stomach dropped violently.

'Something happen, Rob?' His voice hoarse from a day spent in the arid desert.

'I'm fine dipshit,' he kicked the chair next to him, 'sit with me - need to tell you something.'

They'd installed a policy after Sullivan's awkward coming-out. Of course brokered by Mrs. Maitra, who was ten times more mature than both of them combined. It was called the *no-bullshit-between-us-policy*. They told each other their shit now: it was blunt and to the point, and it worked for them.

'What's up?'

Liam asked, sitting down.

Rob tossed him a bottle of water. 'Drink. You sound and look like shit.'

Liam did as told before saying: 'Why do I have a feeling I should actually be drinking vodka for whatever you have to say?'

Rob cracked a grin. 'Nah, it's okay, Liam. You remember how my satellite phone was acting up?'

He nodded: your communication crapping out in the middle of nowhere was every Marine's nightmare and Rob had been bitching about his faulty phone for days.

'Took advantage of my day on base to get it looked at. Some of the guys told me to go see this one communications specialist in particular. A genuine mister-fix-it. Young Corporal by the name of Cope.'

Cope.
Corporal Cope.
It took longer than it should for Liam to remember how to breath.
'Bullshit.'

It had to be bullshit.
Cope - wasn't a run of the mill kind of name, but it wasn't exotic either. There was bound to be at least one more Cope serving and there were thousands of marines in Mogadishu. There was no way in hell this Corporal Cope was *his* recruit Cope.

Cope had gotten a front row seat to the absolute *clusterfuck* of a man Sergeant Liam Bobby Sullivan had become - there was no way he was still serving.

'Yeah, that's what I thought,' Rob drawled. 'But you know me - had to check for myself.'

There was a beat of silence. Liam cleared his throat. 'And?'

Rob grinned. 'Your boy's nice for a Marine. Quirky though.'

'Not my boy, Rob,' Liam said sinking down into his chair, jaw set so tightly he was afraid he was going to break his teeth.

Two years had gone by. *Two years* of fixing himself, forgiving himself - *two years* of surviving without a bottle of booze to pull him through and now Cameron Cope was in fucking *Somalia*. In the same fucking camp as him.

'He saved your ass, Bobby. And you haven't stopped talking about him since.'

Liam let out a sigh. 'It wasn't like that, Rob. You know it wasn't.'

'I wouldn't know what it was like because you were too busy being a martyr to tell your brother shit,' Rob stated. 'What I do know is that it's been two damn years and you still talk about him at least once a week.'

'Because I don't understand why,' Liam snapped. 'I fucked with that

kid's head, Rob. I made his life even harder than it had to be! I tried to fucking destroy him. And what did he do when I was about to nuke my life? He stepped up for me - he lied for me-,'

'He did what I should have done,' Rob said quietly, taking a drink from his own bottle of water, his face stormy. He'd been angry when Liam had finally told him the truth. But not for the reason Liam had expected...

Rob had been angry that Liam hadn't told him, that he hadn't trusted him, that he hadn't thought Rob cared enough to stick around. They'd thrown hands over it. And Liam had *cried* when he'd realised why exactly Rob had been so spitting mad.

'I didn't want to put that on you, Robby,' Liam said knocking their knees together. 'I told you.'

Rob cleared his throat. 'I'm glad he helped you.' The "I don't want to lose you" went unspoken, but heard. Rob was his family, and he knew he was his too. 'Even if helping you meant telling everyone about your brain damage,' he added with a grin.

Liam threw his bottle at him. Rob caught it laughing.

'Asshole,' Liam mumbled with a small grin.

'You should go see him.'

'What I should do is leave the kid alone.'

'He's not a kid - he's a marine. If he wants you to fuck off, he'll tell you.'

Liam let out an amused huff, running a hand over his face. 'He's too polite for that.'

'Didn't he once throw a bucket of piss on someone? If he wants you gone, Liam. I'm sure he'll fucking tell you.'

'I outrank him.'

'Yeah, and he *out-dirts* you. Cope could ruin your life if he wanted to, but here's the thing: I think he'd rather put a bullet through his head than hurt you and that's exactly what you need man,' Rob said with a pointed look. 'Now get your damn shit together and go talk to him. I'm not saying it has to be like...romantic and shit. I just think it will be

good for you. Your brooding martyr shit is getting old.'

Liam took a deep breath. 'NCIS asked him if I was fucking him - point blank,' he closed his eyes, the humiliation still fresh even after two years. 'I can only imagine how fucked up that must've been. Kid was a virgin, hadn't been passed second base with a girl and there he was getting questioned wether or not I bent him over my office desk.'

'You were cleared,' Rob reminded him. 'Cope and that friend of his really sold the fact there wasn't anything between the two of you. And they couldn't prove jack shit about you and the Major.'

'They sold it because there really was nothing going on,' Liam said leaning back and glaring at the night's sky.

'You're soft on him Bobby, it's okay to be soft sometimes. Isn't that what you said at my wedding? Go visit Cope. If not for yourself than do it to clear the air or some shit. Go thank him or apologise, I don't know. Just - I think you need to do this.'

'What I need to do is sleep,' Liam said shoving himself back onto his tired legs. 'And so do you, let's go.'

Rob groaned as he got up, limbs stiff. 'Just so you know: I'm not going to let this go, Bobby.'

'Wasn't counting on it, Robby.'

Chapter 2: Chapter two

Chapter Notes

Hi

I'm glad so many of you liked the first story. I'm pretty partial to a nice fix-it, happy ending myself. The world's dark enough already!

I do most of my typing at night - so expect me coming back in to fix some errors at least a few more times when I'm up and alert.

And though I'm very knowledgeable about my country's army - my knowledge of the US Marines is rather limited to movie stuff. So please forgive me my factual blunders - I'm going off a European country's army :-)

It took him two days.
Two days of Rob giving him shit, to scrap his own shit together. Two days of beating himself up over the past, to accept how the kid who'd saved his career - saved his life probably - was back in his orbit.

Only he wasn't a kid. Not really. They'd sent him to Kuweit, they'd sent him to Somalia. Cope was a genuine Marine now: *Corporal Cope*. It was an honest to god mindfuck, and it hadn't brought out the best in him; he'd reverted back into the pack-a-day, moody asshole he'd been during the inquest into his sexuality. And he almost laughed out loud like a lunatic when he'd realised that in his head Cameron Cope had somehow become just as terrifying as the fucking NCIS. Rob however had given exactly zero fucks about his worrying. Liam had accepted the man loved him in a way his flesh and blood family had never quite managed, but he'd also accepted that Rob was never going to treat him *delicately*.

So on the third day, after spending two grueling days together up north on an aid drop, Rob had dropped a radio into his lap as soon as they'd gotten back to base camp and had told him to: "*move your fucking ass and fix it*".

He was actually pretty sure Rob had fucked with the radio on purpose, since everything had been working fine during the mission. He also wouldn't exactly put it past the pushy motherfucker to have somehow gotten his hands on Cope's rota.

Robert Maitra was as subtle as a brick to the face. And as patient as angry hornet.

So, Liam had gotten some sleep, taken a much needed shower and then dragged his feet all the way to where Rob had been pushing him towards with all the grace of a bird kicking its young from the nest.

The field tent the communications crew had claimed was buzzing with activity. All communications crew currently in camp were working on repairs and doing preventative maintenance to keep comms up and running. Somalia was a swelteringly hot dustbowl - and it fucked up equipment almost faster than they could fix it. Keeping everything up and running was a full-time job.

Out of the buzz, in the back corner of the tent, was Cope, stood at a desk, cleaning a communication satellite.

Liam felt like he'd swallowed cotton.

He almost hadn't recognised him at first glance.
His hair was no longer in a buzzcut and Cope had filled out some more; he was never going to be a big man, but he'd lost his lanky, boyish built in favour of something wiry but strong. It had given him an air of confidence, and he stood straighter now, like a man comfortable in his own skin. *Like a Marine.*

Liam balled his hands at his side to stop them from shaking, as he marched over to Cope.

'Corporal Cope,' he greeted, and it was years of training that made his voice sound as loud and sure as it did.

Cope looked up: blue eyes wide with surprise. 'Sir?' He blurted out, gaping at him like a fish, all Navy propriety forgotten.

Liam tried for a smile - but it felt more like a grimace. 'It's been a while.'

'You're here,' Cope said simply, before frowning and saying, as if to himself: 'Or is it heatstroke?'

Liam cleared his throat. 'I'm here.'

'You're here,' Cope repeated quietly. '*Wow.*'

This time he just nodded once, wordlessly - patiently waiting for

Cope's judgement of him.

'I thought...I mean, well -, they never told me what happened to you,' Cope spluttered. 'I didn't know if-, I always wondered if you were *okay*.'

It was the look in Cope's eyes that made Liam swallow around the lump that had settled in his throat. It was that same earnest look he'd worn all through bootcamp: *kind and guileless*.

'You held the door open for me,' Liam answered and he wished he didn't sound so damn stiff; that he could actually manage a thank you, an apology, something. God knows Cope deserved it all. 'So, they cleared me.'

'And you're...' Cope faltered, biting his lip, '*okay*?'

'Yes, Corporal,' Sullivan said quietly, the iron in his spine melting away into something more relaxed, 'I'm...okay. Are you?'

Cope smiled brighter than he'd ever seen him smile. 'Summercamp in Somalia,' he said, his tone chipper 'What's not to like?'

Sullivan couldn't help but grin back. 'I heard you're running the AV club - boys call you mister-fix-it, any chance you can take a look at this radio?'

'Of course, *Sir*.' He plucked the radio out of Sullivan's hand. 'I'll get right to it.'

'Staff Sergeant - or just Chief will do Cope.'

'I know...it's just...blast from the past.' Cope said with a wave of his hand before sitting down at his desk. 'You can have a seat if you want, Staff Sergeant. If I can fix it, it shouldn't take long and if I can't I'll set you up with a new one. *Easy peasy.*'

Sullivan bypassed a chair, more comfortable perching on the desk, arms crossed, watching Cope take apart the radio with an ease that Liam never would have expected from him - *confidence suited him well.*

'So, the scribe is now a communications specialist.'

'I think the term specialist is a bit of a stretch,' Cope said with a crooked grin. 'But yeah kudos to my mom: hands-off parenting breeds self-sufficient kids who are good at taking care of things, who knew?'

'They don't call you mister-fix-it for nothing.'

'They honestly think too highly of me. I-,'

'You've been fixing stuff - *people*, since bootcamp, Cope. Take the damn credit,' Liam stated and Cope's eyes flickered up, big and earnest. He didn't say a word though, he just looked and Liam couldn't help but look right back. 'You and I both know the reason I'm okay is mostly down to you, Cope,' he added, his voice quiet, but he never looked away - and Cope didn't either.

'I didn't do anything,' Cope said with a shrug.

'Funny. Because I don't remember falling and hitting my head.'

Cope turned beet red and finally looked away. 'Oh...*that*.'

'*That*,' Liam repeated with a nod.

That being the insane story Cope had spun about Liam hitting his head hard some time before the Crucible. He'd lied to Fajardo - and the fucking NCIS - about how Liam had been acting off ever since the entirely ficticious fall.
McAffey had played along of course, and both McKinnon and Howitt had confirmed that Liam had started acting even more off his rocker around that time. After that, everyone had been more than happy to write off everything he'd done at Parris Island as the result of a head injury - especially after the inquest into him had been closed.

'I didn't want you to end up in prison,' Cope said quietly as he tinkered with the radio.

Liam let out a soft huff, what he'd expected all along was true: Cameron Cope was just a better person than most.

'I appreciate that, Cope. But did you have to say I fell out of a dumpster like a dumbass though?' He grinned as he said it, enjoying how sheepish Cope looked.

'I figured tying it to me doing something I actually got in trouble for, would make it more credible,' Cope explained. 'So, falling out of a dumpster it was.'

'Well it worked - so, you were on to something.'

Cope gave him a small smile before turning his eyes back to the radio,

gnawing at his lip as he tinkered with it. 'You probably already know but, NCIS asked me if we were sleeping together,' he said quietly.

'Yeah I know, and I'm sorry you had to deal with that because of me,' Liam said staring at Cope and watching the way his cheeks flushed a blotchy red.

'It wasn't your fault. You were trying to help me and I'm...well me,' Cope said glancing up at him. 'One look at me and they just sort of...assumed, I guess. And I'm pretty sure my shocked pearl-clutching after they asked, didn't help either.'

'You convinced them though.'

Cope snorted. 'I think talking to me convinced them both of us were gay. Ray was the one who convinced them we weren't doing...*that*.'

'McAffey?'

Cope nodded. 'When they questioned him, he told them the only thing you ever did was yell at me. Like you know - a *Drill Sergeant does*. Which wasn't a lie honestly,' he said sounding vaguely amused. 'Then he threw in some things about me from back home and some anecdotes about my mom. And after all of that even the NCIS didn't even seem to think I was gay any more. Just another kid whose parents had - *a lot* - to answer for.'

Liam's eyebrows shot up: the NCIS was rigid and very much of the guilty until proven innocent opinion when investigating possible homosexuality. Exactly how fucked up was Cope's family life to convince them to leave him alone?

'Shit Cope, what did your mom do?'

Cope huffed a laugh - and it was only because Liam was a master at it himself that he recognised it for what it was: *deflection*. 'She didn't beat me or starve me, if that's what you're asking. Let's just say she's a *character*. But it got NCIS to back off, so...'

Liam looked at his hands gripping the corner of the desk so hard they might leave a dent. *He was angry.* So angry he was just inches away from seeing red. He was angry at Cope's mom and the NCIS for fucking with him, sure. But he was absolutely furious with himself for that very same offence. 'I should've stayed away from you,' he finally said. 'Kept them off your trail instead of putting them on it.'

'That bullshit,' Cope blurted out before lamely adding: 'Staff Sergeant.' And as he stared up at Liam, his brow was pinched with outrage. 'You just wanted to help - you did help You made me a Marine - I don't think anyone else could have done that and besides...people already thought I was "*faggy*" before you ever came around.'

'Don't call yourself that,' Liam said sharply.

'It doesn't bother me anymore.'

'No, but it does me,' Liam spat. 'You're a US Marine, Cope. No one has any fucking right to call you anything but that.'

'We're US Marines, Staff Sergeant, why should we care about what some asshole says about me?' Cope questioned with a small smile. 'You taught me to take care of myself - I'll still never be the biggest guy in the room, but I can take care of myself. You don't need to worry - not about me.'

After that, Liam was struck dumb with the stray thought that he was always going to worry about *Recruit Cope.* And probably because he'd been so preoccupied with that sudden revelation, he hadn't noticed the burly figure that had creeped up behind him.

'Yo Cope!' A voice said loudly, tone warm and accent vaguely familiar.

Liam turned his head only to see a broad, dark-haired man staring at him with obvious bewilderment.

It was the *Polak*.
Slovacek.

'Sergeant Sullivan,' Slovacek saluted, all drilled-in discipline and muscle memory, because the look on his face clearly stated exactly what Slovacek thought of him.

'Lance Corporal Slovacek,' Liam said returning the greeting, somewhat surprised the hothead had actually made it to that rank without pissing off the wrong person.

'It's chow time, Slim Jim,' Slovacek stated, his attention firmly back on Cope now that he'd given the absolute minimum measure of politeness required of him.

'You go on,' Cope replied with a wave and a smile, 'I'm just going to finish this real quick. I'll catch up '

Liam had thought Slovacek hated Cope - and considering the latter had thrown a bucket of piss over him, he'd been sure the feeling was mutual. But then again, bootcamp had a habit of creating unlikely friendship.

Slovacek scowled. 'Don't you dare fucking forget to eat Cope - turn back into a fucking string bean and you make all of us fucking look bad.'

'Yes, mother,' Cope replied in a sing-song voice that made the other man scowl.

'If you're still here by the time I get back, I'm dumping you in the latrines,' Slovacek said emphasising each word with a jab of his finger.

Cope shot Slovacek an exasperated look. 'Go eat you hangry bear! And try not to terrorise the villagers while you're at it!'

The corners of Slovacek's mouth twisted up as he gave them a lazy solute.

'I thought you hated each other,' Liam said once Slovacek was out earshot, oddly intrigued by just how chummy they'd gotten.

'I thought *you* hated me too,' Cope said with a shrug before he blew into the radio, causing Liam's gaze to drop down for just a second. 'You know how when you feed a stray cat it's all feral at first, but then when it warms up to you it gets kind of friendly? That's basically Slovacek - he's friendly - just keep him well-fed and don't make any sudden movements.'

Liam chuckled. 'Yeah, I can see that.'

Then Cope set his screwdriver down rather dramatically. 'Staff Sergeant, can I ask you something?'

Liam simply nodded.

'What on earth happened to this radio?'

Chapter 3: Chapter three

Chapter Notes

> I'm going to keep adding to this story for a little while. I'm trying my hand at a slow burn - but please alert when my slow burn turns glacial slow burn? Thanks ;-)
>
> This chapter is from Cam's point of view and I've tried to add a bit of conversation with his inner self here and there without it being too disruptive. You'll recognise them as the sentences in full italics.

Growing up with a mother like Barbara Cope meant he was used to weird things happening left and right; Running into a naked man on a midnight stumble to the bathroom? Check. Being used as a guinea-pig for a new lipstick line? Check. Being brought up with the wrong birthday? Check. Now add some Marine training to a Patended-Barbara-Cope upbringing and "weird" just didn't register half as much as it did for ordinary people.

But today was weird...even by Cameron's standards.

First Sergeant Sullivan - *or well, Staff Sergeant Sullivan* - had appeared out of nowhere, looking like some *Out-magazine-mirage*.
Still insanely intense of course...but also, *softer* somehow? Sure there was probably still an unhealthy amount of rage simmering just beneath the surface. But Sullivan had smiled, he had honest to God laughed - *with him, not at him* - and Cameron honestly didn't know what to do with how attractive that had been...

And while Cam was still reeling from that meeting, Slovacek had apparently decided that their two-year friendship was just a figment of Cam's overactive imagination. So now, instead of listening to Slovacek's swaggering and wisecracking - Cam was being full-on glared at from across the table in the middle of the mess while Slovacek shovelled down his food.

It was weird.
It was weird enough to be classified as *disconcerting*.

"Angsting over Sullivan. Pooping your pants because of Slovacek. Did Doc Brown shove you into a DeLorean? Because we're definitely in 1990 again, Toto!"

"Oh, good God, no."

Cam set down his fork with a sigh, pushed his mess tray to the side, and clasped his hands on the table in front of him. 'Spit it out,' he said, giving Slovacek a prompting look that was met with nothing more than a grunt. Okay, time to break out the big guns. 'What's up with you? Are you on your period?'

Slovacek shot him a baleful look that had long lost its power of intimidation.

"He can still beat you up you know."

"Yes, but I'm faster. So he'll have to catch me first."

'Tell me what's wrong, Nicholas.'

Slovacek's nostrils flared at the mention of his first name, like an enraged bull and he slammed his cutlery onto the table, attracting more than a few looks that quickly lost interest when they spotted him. Everyone who knew Slovacek, or knew of him, was familiar with his outbursts and knew they rarely amounted to anything anymore.

'Why didn't you tell me he was here giving you a hard time?' He snapped: eyes narrowed, mouth pulled into a snarl.

Cam just blinked at him: 'What?'

'Sullivan dipshit! He always had it out for you,' he said before dropping his tone to a fervent whisper only Cam could hear. 'He knows about you - and now he's here giving you shit about it, isn't he? Fucking shit Cope - you should have fucking told me goddammit.'

Cam continued to just blink at him - owlishly. Despite his reputation as a bruiser, Slovacek wasn't stupid. Far from it really. He'd clocked Cam for what he was straight away. And Cam had honestly always figured he'd put two and two together about Sullivan too, especially afterthe inquest...

"So, we're really going to pretend we're as butch as Sullivan? Did you forget we made Boy George look butch when we arrived at boot camp?"

'It's not like that.'

'Guy is a fucking nutjob, Cope! You can't handle that shit on your own! You-,'

'He isn't giving me shit about...*that*,' Cam said quickly, emphasising *that* with an eyebrow raise and a nod.

Slovacek gave him a look that would have curdled milk.

'I'm not lying. Yes, he was hard on me, but it wasn't because he hated me, okay?' Cam said his voice low; just because this was Somalia and no one was actively paying attention to him didn't mean he could afford to be anything but careful.

'The fucker gave you up to NCIS just to get them off his own back when he beat that guy's face in. Semper Fidelis my fucking ass, fucking coward,' and he irritatedly shoved his tray to the side.

Oh.
Ohhh. He'd known the NCIS had questioned Slovacek. He'd known Slovacek had kept mum on what Cam was. But he'd always just assumed NCIS had at least named Sullivan when they'd questioned Slovacek.

'That inquest - it wasn't into *me*,' he blurted out and Slovacek shot him a sharp look.

'What?'

'Think.'

Slovacek frowned as he sat back, arms crossed and Cam could pinpoint the moment realisation hit him. 'Motherfucker,' he spat venomously, 'did he make a move on you? Pressure you or some shit?'

Cam let out a bark of laughter that earned him another sharp look. 'Sorry,' he said sheepishly, 'it's just no - he he's all...and I'm just,' he waved a hand at himself. 'It wasn't like that. It's fine really. You don't need to worry about me. I uhm...appreciate it though.'

"You "appreciate" it? Guy was willing to throw hands for you! Can we take him home and introduce him to our bullies? I mean can you imagine what it would've been like, growing up with him having our back? It wouldn't have been our head down the toilet that's for sure."

"No, I'm actually pretty sure he would've been the one shoving our head down the toilet."

'So basically him treating you like a little bitch was - what? Him pulling some mister Miyagi shit?'

Cam shrugged. 'Kind of.'

'Well shit,' Slovacek said eyes wide with surprise. 'Guy's even weirder than I fucking thought.'

'Probably less weird actually,' Cam pointed out. 'He was under a lot of stress when he was our DI. Remember all the stupid stuff we did at boot camp because we were under stress?' And Cam knew Slovack was vividly remembering the piss, the duck, the food fight, all of it. 'High stress situations, they mess with your head.'

Cam could tell from the tension in Slovacek's jaw and the glint in his eye that he understood. To be fair, Slovacek was likely the only one who would ever truly understand the situation, having faced the threat of being sent upstate hanging over him like Damocles' sword throughout boot camp.

'But today,' Slovacek said after a little while, 'what did he want?'

'A new radio,' Cam said with a small grin. 'And to make amends, I think. I might've helped him shake off some charges by bending the truth.'

'So that shit about him hitting his head.. ?'

'Fictional.'

'Shit, Cope. Sullivan beat that guy into a coma.'

Cam shot him a pointed look.

'That was totally different,' Slovacek said defensively, jabbing his finger at Cam with each word. 'He was a fucking US Marine, Cope. Not some stupid kid who thought he was some big fucking gangster.'

It was honestly impressive just how much Slovacek had changed without actually changing.

'What he did was bad - I get that, but you didn't see the report! Guy was a nightmare - he was bound to pick a fight with the wrong guy eventually.'

'Didn't mean he had to beat him in a coma.'

Cam gnawed at his lip. 'Remember my fight with, Jones?'

Slovacek's eyebrows rose, but he nodded, a barely noticeable dip of

his head.

Cam looked down at his still clasped hands and if he squinted just right, he imagined he could still see Jones' blood staining his bruised knuckles. 'If they hadn't pulled me off him...I don't think I would have stopped either.'

Which, technically speaking, was Sullivan's fault.

And Slovacek doesn't need to know that right now.

Slovacek let out a loud sigh, before slouching down in his chair, arms crossed but his face less stormy. 'We're all a little fucked up, Cope. Doesn't make us bad people.'

Cam cocked a smile. 'Thanks, Nicky.'

He barely dodged the fork Slovacek chucked his way.

Chapter 4: Chapter four

Chapter Notes

> I'm glad so many of you are enjoying this.
> I also hope you enjoy how we're finally starting to go somewhere :-)
>
> But another heads-up: not an American, only vaguely familiar with the US military - so structure and protocols might be way too European to make sense. Sorry!

He'd asked around about him. Of course, he had.
And despite the amount of time he'd spent obsessing over it - no one had even blinked when he'd asked. He'd been Cope's DI and with his reputation for being obsessive about his work, of course, asking about his old recruit wouldn't arouse any suspicion...

Instead, he'd just gotten plenty of congratulations on a job well done. Which meant Liam's brand of tough love with a dash of self-loathing abuse hadn't done any lasting damage to Cope. Everyone seemed to think Cope was a good Marine - maybe, one day he'd even be an excellent one...*if he ever managed to stop broadcasting every, emotion he felt on his face*. Sure, he was never going to be *Mister Combat*, but he held his own well enough and he was steady and reliable when it came to getting his job done.

And, not one man had even mentioned any kind of speculation about his sexuality. *"I wanted to be you,"* Cope had said two years ago, which felt like a lifetime ago now. But shit, Cope was now so much better than him in all the ways that mattered. And he could honestly say he felt some pride at knowing that somehow, despite the fucked up way he'd gone about it, he'd helped Cope. And it had been a long time since he'd felt anything akin to pride.

Breathing became a little easier after that.

He'd been curious enough to enquire after Slovacek as well, and he'd been a little surprised to hear the hothead had settled in well enough. Sure he still had a temper and a big mouth that reared up occasionally, but his superiors all agreed on one quality Liam really hadn't expected: kid was *loyal - the leave no one behind, take a bullet for you loya*l. And he was glad Cope seemed to be on the receiving end of that loyalty. Because if anything, Slovacek had a look to him that

screamed back-the-fuck-off, and Liam didn't doubt that him having Cope's back had made a difference.

He didn't catch wind of McAffey though. Cope's brother in all but blood. Or not until a few days later at least...

'What was the name of Cope's friend again?' Rob asked suddenly appearing in front of him as he was doing pull-ups in the camp's impromptu gym.

'Slovacek?' He huffed as he lowered down.

'No, the other one - the one he signed up for,' Rob said before unceremoniously tossing Liam's towel at his face, signifying his workout was officially over.

'McAffey,' Liam said dropping back onto his feet with a thud, before wiping down his hands and face.

'R. McAffey?'

Liam looked up at him, a chill going through him despite the sweltering heat and the sweat sticking his clothes to his body. 'Something happen?' Rob had a habit of being the first to know anything - both the good and the bad and from the look on his face, this definitely wasn't going to be good.

'Some a-holes hit up Mogadishu Airport again. He was on the injured list - nothing bad, everything worse than a graze got a medevac,' Rob said. 'Place got shot up pretty bad though. All further air traffic to Mogadishu is cancelled until further notice.'

Liam swore under his breath. He was glad McAffey seemed to be okay but shutting down air traffic was a damn near disaster. 'So no more aid coming in?'

'Not until they get everything up and running again. So tomorrow's aid escort has been cancelled, our new orders just came in, Sully.'

Liam narrowed his eyes at him: all of this was a shitshow and a half, yet Rob sounded fucking chipper. 'What are the orders?'

'We're escorting a transport being sent to Mogadishu airport to help fix things ASAP - and we're staying there to help guard the place against those militia fuckers,' Rob grinned. 'Hope you don't mind I put Cope in a LAV with us.'

Liam glared at him. Of course, Cope was going. And of fucking course Rob had made damn sure to keep him close. Liam honestly didn't know if he wanted to thank him or throttle him.

'You can't just leave well enough alone, can you?'

Rob shrugged. 'I'm doing all of us a favour - you were damn near pleasant after your little talk with Cope. Just imagine what a *little peach* you'll be after an hour in close quarters with him.'

'Why the fuck are we friends again?'

Rob swung an arm around him, unbothered by the stench and stick of sweat clinging to Liam, and ruffled his hair. 'We're brothers, Bobby and I tired of watching you beat yourself up over the shit I stirred up.'

'It was my fault,' Liam said, his throat tight as he forced out the painful truth. 'I lied to you - you thought you were protecting me.'

'I should have figured you out ages ago.'

Liam scoffed. 'Couldn't even admit it to myself, Robby. You didn't stand a fucking chance in hell.'

'Got your back now though...so why not try? And I'm taking friendship here, Sully. These past two years, all you've had is me, Tina, and work - why not expand the circle a little? You know about him, he knows about you, and the guy's funny, good company. I'd have a beer with him-,'

'You'd have a beer with anyone.'

Rob ignored him: 'What I'm trying to say is: give it a shot. If you don't I'll have to keep dunking radios in water to make you talk to him'

'That's what you did? Robert Maitra messing with government property, who would have thought?' Liam said quirking a grin.

But Rob just stared at him, mouth drawn and eyes serious: 'You're government property and they messed with you - they owe you a million radios for that shit.'

Rob Maitra's love packed as much of a punch as he did. And for a minute Liam was winded by the reminder that Rob really had not only accepted what he was, but had also decided not to give a shit.

Once the orders trickled down to everyone involved; the whole camp

became an anthill of activity. Everyone was itching to get a move on: with the airport down, their fastest, most reliable supply line was also down and everyone knew how fast things could go to shit without a supply line. And before Liam had even had time to stop and breathe, he was already standing in front of the convoy, going through the final checks.

And that's when he spotted him, loading some chests into a truck, arms straining under the heavy equipment inside. He'd hoped something would have come up, that Cope somehow wouldn't have to go. Mogadishu Airport was always a wildcard - the place that saw the most action - and part of him still didn't want Cope anywhere near that kind of thing, even though he was no longer some 95-pound bag of skin, bones, and heart.

'Staff Sergeant Sullivan?' A gruff voice called.

Liam turned around, only to come face to face with a chest, a Sergeant Major's chest, a very tall Sergeant Major. Liam was by no means a small man and he sure as hell wasn't used to straining his neck to look a man in the eye.

'Sergeant Major,' he greeted.

'Wood, Frederick. Communications Battaljon. I heard I'd be riding with you today?'

Well, that sure explained why their LAV was one man light. Liam was quite sure Wood was exactly at the top of the Navy's allowed height. Other than that, he was non-descript; dark eyes, dark hair, and an easy grin.

Liam nodded. 'Need any help loading up?'

'No, we're just about done,' Wood said. 'I just wanted to give you a heads up about something before we get to the Airport.' A heads up usually implied trouble, exactly what they already had plenty of. 'My Corporal, Corporal Cope? He's a great guy, bit quirky, though. And last time we were at the airport, back when we landed, some SEAL guy noticed and started some shit. Said some shit, implied some shit. You know how it is.'

Liam set his jaw. 'Dick measuring contest.'

Wood noded: 'Cope isn't the type to take the bait - but apparently the guy crossed some lines and the guys from the battalion Cope usually

joins heard. One in particular took offence - Polak friend of his.'

'Slovacek,' Liam said with an almost amused huff.

Wood frowned. 'You know him?'

Liam gave a nod. 'I know both of them. I was their DI.'

Wood let out a booming laugh. 'Fuck, they let you be a DI? Poor kids must have shit themselves. My DIs all had kids and minivans not combat medals.'

Liam gave him a tight smile that felt more like a grimace. His time as a DI wasn't exactly something he was proud of. 'What did Slovacek do?'

'Started a brawl,' Wood said with a grin. 'Shit, you should have seen the left hook he landed. Made me proud to be a Marine. Absolutely poleaxed the guy. We stepped in after - COs did some yelling, but with all the media attention, they decided to keep it hush-hush. And everyone agreed cocky shit had it coming, running his mouth the way he did.'

'He always had gravel in his gut and a punch to back it up,' Liam said, distinctively remembering the reason Slovacek had joined the Marines.
But there it was, that loyalty he'd been hearing about. Decking a SEAL was a gutsy move, doing it in a place crawling with superior officers? Damn near insane.

'That's why it's a damn shame they're keeping his battalion here,' Wood said, his mouth now set in a hard line. 'And that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I heard there are still SEALS operating out of that airport. And I can imagine the one who picked on Cope might still be a little sore from having his ass handed to him by a Marine. Now Cope can handle himself just fine, but if it comes to a rematch, I doubt it's going to be a fair fight. Few idiots are dumb enough to try anything while I'm around but-,'

'I'll keep an eye on him,' Liam said - and if he was being honest with himself...he probably would have done so anyway.

Wood clasped his shoulder. 'I owe you - he's a great kid, don't want him to get hurt.'

'You and me both, brother,' Liam muttered as Cope hopped from the

truck he'd been loading, chatting animatedly to a morose-looking Sergeant. And then he saw him too, and his eyes went wide with surprise as the ghost of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He was as ridiculously good-natured as ever. But he was...better, more balanced; comfortable in the Navy and comfortable with himself in a way Liam had never quite managed.

All in all, it took them ten minutes to climb into the LAV. Squeezing into the tiny passenger compartment was a pain on the best of days. Squeezing a certified giant in there was something worse. The VC had sworn up a blue streak when he'd caught sight of Wood and his driver and gunner had laughed their asses off as he'd basically tetris'ed them to fit relatively comfortably. The morose Sergeant who'd been talking to Cope - and who measured in at a relatively diminutive 5'4"- was deemed the only one who could comfortably fit in the same row as Wood. Which meant Liam was sharing a row with Cope and Rob, and Cope, being the shortest out of the three of them, was squeezed into the middle, pressed up against Liam from shoulder to knee.

'So, Cope,' Rob said after a while, looking entirely too pleased with himself, 'pretty interesting colleagues you've got.'

Wood had fallen asleep not three minutes after sitting down, and the Sergeant, Sergeant Paulson, had put a pair of headphones on and was now mindlessly fiddling with the Rubik's Cube in his lap. It had taken more than a little willpower on Liam's part not to smash the guy's Walkman and demand what the fuck was wrong with him.

'Wood hasn't slept in a while,' Cope said with a grimace. 'Too busy getting everything ready and Sergeant Paulson, well..he was in a LAV that took a hit and caught fire in Kuwait. Half the people in it died. We're honestly happy when we can still get him in one...one way or another.'

'Shit,' Rob blurted out, and Liam couldn't help but agree. LAVs were basically coffins on wheels - them catching fire ranked high on almost everyone's list of worst nightmares. No wonder Sergeant Paulson looked like a dead-eyed zombie.

'Yeah,' Cope said biting his lip, 'sorry for throwing that out there? It's a downer...especially when you're actually *in* a LAV.'

'It's on me. I should've kept my mouth shut.'

'That's usually the problem,' Liam muttered, earning himself a slap around the head as Rob reached over Cope, pressing him even firmer

into Liam's side.

Liam wasn't a kid, he was a Marine. He could handle being in close quarters with other guys without it being a thing. But it being Cope made it different, if only because he knew Cope shared his inclination.

'What was it like, having Bobby for a DI?' Rob asked.

Cope blinked owlishly as he mouthed Liam's middle name in confusion,

'Liam Bobby Sullivan,' Rob explained with a shit-eating grin. 'Really suits him, don't you think?'

Liam shot him a murderous look. 'Fuck you, Robby.'

'Officially I'm a Robert - you're a Bobby all the way.'

'He was a great DI!' Cope suddenly piped up, eyes shifting between them nervously. 'Little scary, lots of yelling - you know, all the DI stuff.'

'You can relax, Cope,' Liam said. 'We're good - we're not going to throw down.'

'I've known Sully since boot camp,' Rob added with an easy grin. 'If you need any *more* dirt on him, I'm your man. I know *everything* about him.'

Rob Maitra was as subtle as a baseball bat to the kneecap.

Liam shot him a glare as the statement hung heavily between the three of them, but Rob simply raised his eyebrows at him: daring him to do something, so Liam just sighed and mumbled: 'It's true Cope, Rob knows everything there is to know about me.'

Cope openly gawked at them, eyes wide. ‘Oh. Oh wow. I—uhm—I’m really glad, I mean happy for you—’

Both Liam and Rob clocked it at the same time.

‘No. Rewind that shit, Cope,’ Liam cut in quickly, keeping his voice low. ‘It’s not like that. He’s my brother.’

Cope flushed scarlet and mumbled an apology, but Rob just chuckled, elbowing him lightly in the ribs, good-natured now in a way he wouldn’t have been just a few years ago. ‘I know our Bobby’s a pretty

boy, but he doesn't have anything I'm interested in.'

Liam flicked a glance at the other passengers. They were still wrapped up in their own worlds, unaware — thank God — his heart thundering in his chest at hearing his sexuality referenced so casually. As if it wasn't the same thing that had nearly landed him in a courtroom, or worse.

The LAV jolted suddenly, rattling hard over another torn-up stretch of road. Months of civil unrest and the grind of UN convoys had turned Somalia's dirt roads into a maze of potholes and debris — nothing dangerous, just brutal on the spine. Liam and Rob braced with one hand against the wall, using the other to keep Cope from getting pitched into the belt hard enough to leave bruises.

'You okay, Sarge?' Cope called over the rumble.

Of course his first thought was Sergeant Paulson. Liam looked back too — the man was looking a little green, but he still managed a weak thumbs-up. 'Just some potholes, Cope,' he said through clenched teeth.

'Yeah, think of it as a low-budget Disneyland,' Wood muttered, bleary-eyed.

The road smoothed out again, the bone-rattling shake slipping back into the standard LAV buzz.
That's when Liam noticed it — Rob had done the normal thing, steadying Cope by the arm. But Liam? He'd pinned Cope in place by gripping his upper thigh. High enough that anyone would read it as a come-on. And from the way Cope was side-eyeing him through his lashes, he'd definitely noticed. Liam pulled his hand back — not too fast, trying for casual and missing by a mile — and awkwardly put what little space he could between them in the cramped compartment. His muscles were strung tight as wire. Two years celibate: partly to keep his head down and avoid trouble, partly penance for what he'd done to Aaron. Of course it would choose now to crawl back out of the grave he'd shoved it into. And of course Rob saw everything — and threw him a grin that said I knew it.

Liam forced himself to look away, jaw tight. He'd be lying if he said he hadn't noticed how much Cope had changed — taller, steadier, confident in a way that made everything feel too easy around him. But it didn't have to mean anything. It couldn't. He wasn't about to drag Cope under the same way he'd dragged Aaron.

‘Were you two in Kuwait too?’ Cope asked out of nowhere. ‘I always wondered if—’

Liam cut him off with a curt nod before the question could open anything best left buried.

‘Sent Bobby straight back to us once they’d sorted out his head,’ Rob said. ‘Heard you were there when he took that *nasty tumble*.’

Cope cleared his throat. ‘Yeah.’

Rob leaned forward slightly, curious. ‘He still won’t tell me what he was doing in a dumpster.’

‘Chewing me out,’ Cope said simply. ‘I faked a toilet paper heist and ignored a direct order.’

Rob gave a low whistle. ‘Shit. That vein in his forehead must’ve been throbbing.’

Liam saw Cope bite back a grin, head dipping like he was trying to hide it. ‘I was terrified,’ he admitted. ‘I thought he was going to kill me.’

‘He probably wanted to,’ Rob laughed. ‘*Wet Blanket* over here hates any kind of funny business.’

‘If that were true, you’d have been dead ages ago,’ Liam muttered, giving Rob a dry look — but his voice came out softer than intended.

Cope’s expression shifted — not playful now, but open in a way that made Liam instinctively sit a fraction straighter, as if bracing for impact. ‘He was a good DI,’ Cope said. Earnest. ‘Harsh sometimes, but he looked out for me. I… thought about that a lot in Kuwait. It kinda felt like he was still there — guiding me along.’

Liam swallowed, pulse thudding slow and heavy behind his ribs. Cope meant it. Every word. And the loyalty in his voice hit Liam harder than he wanted to let show.

Rob just hummed, leaning back. ‘Yeah. That sounds like Bobby.’

Chapter 5: Chapter five

Chapter Notes

> Another one from Cam's point of view. Quick reminder: Cam's internal dialogue is fully in italics.
>
> Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Spending time with Sullivan and Maitra had been… interesting. Maitra was less intense than Sullivan; still rough around the edges, but open, unguarded in a way Sullivan never was. He laughed easily, smiled often, and, more than anything, he cared about Sullivan. That much was obvious. And Sullivan was different around him too. Still intense, obviously, but Maitra's presence relaxed him. His jaw unclenched, his back wasn't rigidly straight, and - as ridiculous as it sounded - he actually blinked more. *More human bleeding through the Marine.*

For the first time ever, Cam had been disappointed to climb out of a LAV. But then Maitra had said they'd talk soon, and Sullivan had nodded - barely noticeable, but a nod all the same. And that had felt… oddly nice.

Mogadishu airport was as much of a mess as ever. Cleaner, sure - they'd done their best to make the place liveable - but most of the progress was undone by months of militia attacks. And when Cam arrived at the communications hub with Wood, Anderson, and their gear, they'd been greeted as if they were the second coming of Christ. Because apparently almost everything was down.

It was only hours later, after dragging the system back to a faint pulse, Wood finally waved him off.
'We've done all we can for today, Cope. Go find your friend. I know you've been itching to check on him.'

And it had been a struggle all day to keep his thoughts off Ray — *and other things*. Ray had been injured during the raid. Cam knew it wasn't serious, at least not serious enough for a medevac. But not knowing the details? That was torture. So it was a relief to find Ray actually waiting for him — face scraped, a few shallow cuts, and his right hand swathed in clean white bandages.

'Ray!' Cam called, composure forgotten as he pulled his friend into a hug. Ray felt solid. Alive.

'Is everything okay? I mean, you look kind of okay, but are you *actually* okay?'

'I'm fine, Cam,' Ray said with a laugh. 'Nothing that won't heal.'

'Your hand?'

'Assholes rigged fireworks with explosives — not the big kind, but—'

'The *functioning* kind.'

'*Exactly*. And so I have second-degree burns. Needs cleaning every day, no touching the blisters, hence the mummy hand.'

'It's a good look. Very MJ,' Cam said, grinning.

'Yeah, well, Michael Jackson could take his glove off. Try cutting army food one-handed, Cam? It's not a picnic,' Ray grumbled. 'Honestly, I'm just happy you're here to cut my food without any smartass commentary. The guys all think they're real comedians.'

Cam laughed. It was always easy with Ray; like slipping back into an old rhythm.
Ray led him to the mess, shamelessly putting him to work fetching trays and food. Cam didn't mind. After all that worry, it felt good just to listen to Ray's voice again.

'I still can't believe you ditched me to spend leave with Slovacek,' Ray said once they'd sat down. The mess had mostly emptied — just a few scattered groups left; they were late and the rush had already passed.

'You were with Alice,' Cam said, cutting Ray's food into neat bites. 'You were meeting each other's parents. It would've been weird. What was I supposed to say? "Hi, I'm Cam, his best friend — please don't mind me, I'm a little queer"?'

Ray snorted and bumped his shoulder. 'Alice loves you. Her parents would've loved you too. My mom was actually disappointed you didn't come.'

'She's been sending me care packages,' Cam said, his tone softening as he slid Ray's tray back to him.

'Yeah, I know,' Ray said, accepting his fork. 'Apparently your thank-

you letters are way better than mine. So thanks for that too.'

Cam smiled. 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder. And honestly, Slovacek's not so bad. Bit of a jackass, sure, but a pretty good friend.'

'A good friend who helped you pick up a guy,' Ray said with a knowing look. 'Didn't see that coming by the way.'

'He *also* set me up with that girl before Kuwait, remember?'

'Oh, I remember,' Ray said around a mouthful of food. 'Never thought I'd see the day.'

Cam made a face. 'Can't believe I let him talk me into that. And that guy? That was mostly thanks to his sister and her girlfriend, really. Slovacek just tagged along to keep an eye on us, and just sat there radiating *fuck off* energy while he drank beer all night.'

Ray chuckled.

'Anyway, we didn't even *hook up*-hook up. I wasn't about to get naked in an alley. I have some standards left' Cam said, wrinkling his nose. 'And I didn't want to pop *that cherry* with Slovacek listening in.'

Ray dropped his fork. 'What?'

'You honestly think he was going to let me run off with some random guy? He kept watch - like not eyes on me kind of watch - but like...*fire watch* from across the street,' Cam grimace. 'He wasn't like *looking looking* or anything, just wanted to make sure I hadn't picked up *gay Ted Bundy*.'

Ray grimaced. 'That's...so weird. Yet somehow pretty on brand for him too.'

'Weird but sweet,' Cam corrected.

"Hmmm, now who else do we know that's weirdly sweet?"

"No."

"If you don't tell him and he finds out, he'll just freak out," his inner voice sighed. *"He's very dramatic for a straight guy, and we do not need that right now."*

"Maybe he won't find out. It's an airport, lots of space."

"With your luck? Sure, bet on that. Sounds like a real solid plan, Corporal."

"I hate it when you're right."

Cam twirled his fork, clearing his throat; painfully awkward, even for him. ‘So, uh… guess who I rode over here with?’

Ray frowned mid-bite.

‘Yeah,’ Cam said, grimacing. ‘Sullivan.’

Ray froze, fork halfway to his mouth. ‘*Sullivan*? *Sergeant* Sullivan?’

‘Staff Sergeant now,’ Cam corrected.

‘Holy shit. He’s still serving?’

‘Back in his old unit.’

'Holy shit.’

‘You said that already.’

‘I know,’ Ray muttered, ‘but *holy shit,* you know? So- what’s he like? Still an absolute psychopath?’

Cam choked on a laugh. 'Less psycho. Definitely less. Intense, yeah. Scary - not so much. He's been...nice. *Really* nice actually. Though he looks kind of confused by it.'

'How does this guy keep passing his psych evals?'

'Maybe because he's not actually crazy?' Cope offered with a shrug.

'No, he's just a little confused,' Ray deadpanned. 'Jesus Cam, the guy was an absolute nightmare and he nearly killed you - *more than once.*'

Cam wrinkled his nose. 'Not on purpose. If he'd really wanted me dead, I'd probably be dead.'

Ray stared at him. 'Stop saying stuff like that like it's a compliment.'

Cam's grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. 'Isn't it though? I mean "kill" is kind of our favourite word, right?'

'Don't get cute with me, Cam.'

'I totally am though, right?'

Ray rolled his eyes. 'I'm sure Sullivan thinks so.'

Cam looked at Ray measuringly. 'Are you?'

"Subtle."

"Shut up."

'Cam,' Ray said, eyes searching, his tone cautious.

Cam bit his lip. He knew he was pushing it, knew even thinking out loud was pushing it. But he had to tell someone. *Someone preferably not living in his head.*

"Rude."

'I think he might be flirting with me,' Cam blurted, the words spilling out all at once as he braced for the recoil.

'What the fuck, Cam,' Ray said. 'You *know* how dangerous that is!'

'Of course I know,' Cam shot back, rolling his eyes, but there was a nervous edge to it. 'Trust me, I remember the interrogation *vividly*. But it's not obvious...I don't even think he realises he's doing it.'

'What does that even mean?'

'It's confusing,' Cam admitted. 'It's just...it's little things, okay? And he's smiling at me - real smiles. It's subtle, nothing anyone else would notice. It's nothing like Jones-,'

Ray groaned, tipping his head back. 'Jones. You mean the guy he used to manipulate you with, remember that?'

Oh. Right. *That.*
Cam flexed his fingers, feeling the phantom sting of split knuckles. His chest went tight. How could he forget his first real crush playing him like a fiddle at Sullivan's behest?

"He wanted to protect you."

Cam looked down, almost embarrassed. 'He just wanted to protect me,' he echoed quietly.

Ray dragged his uninjured hand down his face. 'He has a sick way of

showing it. The guy tried to *isolate* you. Pitched Jones against you, made you beat the crap out of him. And the things he said to you, Cam - that wasn't DI bullshit, that was *completely out of line.'*

He was right, of course Ray was right but there were other things, kinder things: a gentle touch, rough incouragements and even an approving grin here and there - Cam couldn't forget the good things, the kind things Sullivan had done either.

'He was just scared,' he said quietly.

Ray let out a long sigh. And Cam knew *scared* was something Ray understood. *Sared* was something Ray could forgive.
‘Of course he’s flirting with you,’ Ray said finally, resigned. ‘And of course he doesn’t know it. The guy’s always been fixated on you. Freaked me out before I knew he was, *you know* and not a bigot.’

Cam huffed out a laugh. But, the words twisted something warm and dangerous low in his gut. He’d always thought Sullivan’s gaze lingered too long and now that it was confirmed, it was… *flattering*. Sullivan was a handsome man — and he was just Cameron Cope.

'Do you want it?’ Ray asked hesitantly. ‘The flirting?’

Cam froze. That was the million-dollar question, the one even his inner voice wouldn’t touch. What he felt for Sullivan was complicated: layers of fear, anger, respect, and something softer threading through it all. ‘I… think I might,’ he admitted finally.

‘Cam,’ Ray groaned. ‘Come on.’

I’m sorry!’ Cam threw up his hands. ‘It’s just - there’s a *connection*. And I don’t get a lot of those!'

Ray exhaled through his nose, the tension in his shoulders loosening slightly. ‘I get it. Or at least, I think I do. But Sullivan - he hates himself. I don’t want him taking that out on you, okay?’

Cam’s smile was soft, fond. ‘You don’t have to worry about me all the time anymore, Ray.’

'I know. You’re a big bad Marine now, Slovacek taught you to fight dirty, sure.’ He paused, rubbing his temple. ‘But this… this is different. If it goes bad - hell, not even Sullivan could save himself last time. Took your insane plan and two idiot recruits to bail him out. I don’t think we can pull something like that off twice.’

‘He’s gotten better,’ Cam said, hesitating. ‘Or at least, I think so. He told his friend - about his *thing*. So, someone has his back...it helps when someone has your back, you know?'

‘A friend… who’s...*like you*?’

Cam snorted. ‘No. He’s definitely like you.’

Chapter End Notes

So, yes I might have given Slovacek a gay sister. I really thought it suited his general vibe.

And I'm sorry for my pretty slow pacing, but I like my details and We're working towards something...I vaguely think :-)

Chapter 6: Chapter six

Chapter Notes

> I wrote this in kind of a haze - I think I was a little high off all the positive feedback :-)
>
> Little heavy - tried to add some lighter bits. Might have worked, might not have worked.
>
> I'll be triple checking for grammar and spelling blunders tomorrow - so ignore them for the time being. It's pretty late over here, so I'm a little sleepy and not on my A game!

Everyone had their own ritual after a mission.
Gomez cleaned his gun; Williams hit the head; Lambert rolled a new batch of cigarettes; Rob went hunting for some chow. And Liam? Liam always went straight for the showers.

It felt good to wash away the dirt, the stench, the *stress* of a mission.

They'd only been gone five days this time; a mission to "*peacefully*" disarm the militia that had attacked the airport. They'd disarmed them, sure. Peacefully had never been on the table. The cuts and scrapes, some shallow, some deeper, stung as he scrubbed them clean with soap. But otherwise, he was fine. Most of them were. Their youngest, Danny, had taken two hits straight to the vest and he'd be out of commission for a while, but that was the worst of it.

Though Rob would probably argue Liam's facial hair situation was actually the worst of it. His "lacking" facial hair had become a running joke, one that probably wouldn't have an expiration date. He was nearing thirty now and it was still patchy; more fluff than stubble. He was always glad to shave it off, though he'd shoot himself before admitting it. Truth was, he had a vain streak. He took pride in looking put-together. Maybe even handsome, even if most of the men around him couldn't give a fuck.

'Yo, Sully,' Williams called as he strolled in. 'Looking fresh, man.'

'Thanks, Willy.' Liam wiped off the last bit of shaving cream.

'You'd better head to the mess though,' Williams said with a grin. 'Robby the Bear went a little feral on a baby SEAL.'

Liam turned. 'He *did what*?'

'Roughed up some kid. Said the guy was talking shit.'

Unlike Liam, Rob seemed to be able to grow a full beard in five days giving him a grizzly appearance that occasionally bleeded through into his personality: and a baby SEAL talking shit? Rob never could resist that kind of bait.

'Motherfucker,' Liam muttered, pulling on a clean shirt.

'You know what's up?' Williams asked, already stripping down for the shower.

'I might," Liam said gruffly. 'He still in the mess?'

'Basking in his triumph, man,' Williams laughed, disappearing into the stall.

Liam marched to the mess, pulse tight and hot. Ever since the ride over, Rob had been like a dog with a bone about Cope—forgetting, apparently, what had happened the *last* time Liam had let himself get tangled up like that. Not that there was anything to get tangled in now. Sure, Cope was attractive. Sure, Liam might've been soft on him. But that didn't mean a damn thing.

He found Rob in the mess, shoveling ravioli like it had insulted him, Lambert sitting across, lazily rolling cigarettes.

'The fuck did you do?' Liam asked, dropping into the seat opposite.

Rob only grinned.

'Hello to you too, Sully,' Lambert said loudly, not bothering to look up. 'I'm fine, thanks for asking.'

'Hey, Lamb. He drag you into this?'

'Came for dinner—stayed for the show.'

'You start shit with a SEAL?' He demanded turning back to Rob.

'Kid was mouthing off about a Marine,' Rob said. 'Couldn't let that slide.-

'Making fun of some comms guy,' Lambert added. 'Called him a pussy or some shit. In Rob's defense, kid was loud enough to make sure

everyone heard.'

'So some asshole was talking shit and you *deck* him? Want to start shit with a SEAL team, Robby?'

'Relax,' Rob said. 'I just scruffed him, shoved him into a wall, told him to mind his manners. His Sergeant didn't care—apparently the kid's mouth gets him in trouble all the time.'

'And it's not like we came in looking like we just got back from a church picknick, Sully,' Lamb said with a snort, as he waved a hand at his scrapped face. 'That gaggle of baby SEALs wasn't stupid enough to defend the little bastard against Staff Sergeant Angry Bear over there.'

Liam's jaw flexed. 'Cope around?'

Rob's grin was too smug for comfort and Liam had to bite his tongue not to let out a curse: the fuck was he thinking? Asking about Cope? 'He was walking out when fuckface opened his trap - didn't catch a damn thing.'

Lambert squinted. 'Who's Cope?'

'Comms,' Rob said easily. 'Sully here was his DI. He's *protective*, you know how it is.'

Liam hated how Rob smirked around that word. 'He did me a solid when I was messed up,' Liam added flatly.

'So, we owe him?' Lambert nodded. 'Roger that. But if Cope's the comms guy, who's Slovacek?'

'Friend of his,' Liam said, though the fact the two of them were friends still felt...odd.

'Can we look into having him transfered to us?' Lamb asked and Rob let out a bark of laughter.

'What?'

'SEAL dad said kid throws one hell of a punch.'

A few hours later, when Rob was back to his regulation-self and they were doing their weapon's maintenance together, the subject of Cameron Cope was brought up again with the subtlety of a bull in a China shop.

'You dropping by to see Cope?'

Liam stared at him: 'Get a damn hobby.'

Rob grinned. 'Picking on you is my hobby, Bobby.'

'Well, find a new one,' Liam groused. 'And leave Cope out of it.' He'd caused Cope enough trouble to last him a lifetime. He wasn't going to risk hurting him in any way because of his own shit - not again.

'I like him,' Rob said with a shrug. 'He's fun. Tina would love him.'

'Well too bad they're not going to meet,' Liam said giving Rob a warning look. 'I'm not interested in Cope - I'm not interested in anyone Maitra. Now get that through your thick skull and leave it alone.'

'It's not healthy, Bobby.'

'It's plenty healthy if the alternative is fucking prison!' Liam snapped throwing his tools down with a clatter. 'Or did you forget that was where I almost ended up last time you got involved in my fucking business?'

Rob took a deep breath: 'Okay, so we're doing this. Fine let me have it, Liam. I'm all ears,' Rob said cleaning off his hands with a rag before setting them down on the bench, jaw set and eyes fixed on Liam. 'Get it off your chest. You've been sitting on that shit for two years, it's about time I hear it.'

'I don't understand why, Rob! Why do you keep pushing me to-, it's illegal. You know it's illegal - hell you were fine with it being illegal until-,'

'Until I wisened up,' Rob said. 'I was an idiot. I was an idiot who just did as his daddy did. Fact. But then there was you and there was Tina - and all her gay beauty school friends. And you know what she said to me?' His voice dropped into a whisper. 'She said: you don't hate Sully, you love Sully. Why would him liking guys change that? He's still your Sully.'

Liam looked away as he tried to breath through the lump that had settled in his throat and was threatening to choke him.

'And you know, I figured she was right. She's always right. I looked at you and you were still that skinny ginger prick who ran circles around me - the guy who saved my life a shit ton of times - the guy who

helped me propose - the guy who sang at my wedding even though he hates any type of attention and I-,' he broke off, eyes on the ground as he took a deep breath. 'I figured it didn't matter. It doesn't matter. Not to me anyway.'

'So it's okay, because it's me?' Liam asked shaking his head, pushing back against the affection he felt for Rob and clutching at the irritated, rational piece of his brain that had been itching for a fight for two years now. 'But guys like Aaron, they can just get sent to jail. Fuck 'em?'

Rob let out a humorless laugh. 'So it's about him, huh? Get this Liam: I would have reported Wilkinson if he'd been a chick. He was a Major, Bobby. He had ten years on you. None of that shit was kosher.'

Liam could feel himself flush. Indignation? Fury? Embarrassment? He wasn't sure. 'I've got seven years on Cope and you-,'

'That's different. It's different and you know it is, don't act like you don't,' Rob said evenly. 'Wilkinson didn't get sent to jail because I said he came on to you. Or some fucking tattoo. Wilkinson got sent to jail because you weren't the only fucking one. All younger - all non-officers. I don't know what he was to you, Liam. Something probably. But the man sure as hell wasn't a fucking Saint.'

Liam felt like he was falling with both his feet planted firmly on the ground as Rob knocked the wind out of him without even moving a muscle: after the bar, after his weak attempt at desertion, after Cope and after the hospital - he'd never asked about Aaron and the investigation that had sent him to prison. Part guilt, part fear of incriminating himself. 'What?'

'Look, I'm not saying nothing between you was like...real, or some shit. But the guy...he's a user, Liam. He uses people. And you don't deserve that shit. Is it fucked up he got sent to jail over being...what he is? Yeah, fuck no one deserves that. But do I feel guilty for making damn sure he stayed the fuck away from you? No, fuck that shit.'

Liam looked down at the familiar sight of his boots; he felt bruised, and he ached - he ached in a way that begged for cheap alcohol and oblivion. 'How many?' He blurted out, fucking masochist. He cleared his throat. 'How many other guys?'

He didn't need to look up to know the look Rob was giving him. 'A few,' he said simply, 'don't beat yourself up about it, okay?'

'Jesus fuck,' Liam muttered as he felt himself collaps in on himself like a house of cards.

'You get why I want you to let it go, now?'

It. Because it was easier to stomach than him. And Rob for his lifetime of macho bullshit understood and that was enough for Liam to have to blink back tears. 'Yeah. I get it.'

Rob checked his shoulder with his own, it's rough and clumsy, but Liam took it for what it was: I'm here.

'We good, Bobby?'

'We're always good, brother,' Liam said and he meant it. 'I'm going to...I need -,'

Rob nodded. 'I'll put your shit away, don't worry about it,' he grabbed Liam's arm. 'Don't do anything stupid this time, you hear? It's over. You've got me. You've got Tina and you've got the brotherhood.' Liam nodded, just once and Rob let him go. 'If you're not in bed in two hours - I'm sending out a search party, clear?'

'Crystal,' his voice even hoarser than usual.

By the time Liam finally stepped outside, his head was a storm. Rob's words still echoed — *It doesn't matter. Not to me.*
But it did matter. It always did.

He found a quiet spot between the mess and the airport building, sat down, lit a cigarette. He'd told himself he was done with ghosts.

But guilt had a way of finding you, even in the dark.

The sound of boots on gravel. He looked up and there was Cope. Of *fucking course it was Cope.*

He sat beside him, close enough their arms brushed. 'Ran into Staff Sergeant Maitra,' Cope said, a little breathless. 'He said you could use some company. Took me an hour to find you—thank God you're not wearing camo.'

Liam huffed a laugh. 'Ran into him, or did he send you?'

Cope blinked. 'He seemed surprised to see me?'

Liam didn't push. He just held out the cigarette wordlessly.

Cope grimaced. 'No thanks. Tried one in Kuwait. Threw up. It was very much a: let's not do this again kind of experience.'

Liam chuckled. 'Bad habit anyway,' he said before taking another drag.

'If it's bad for me, it's bad for you,' Cope said as he deftly plucked the cigarette from between Liam's lips, one of his fingers brushing past Liam's cheek.

Liam just stared at him. 'You lose your mind, *Corporal*?´

Cope grinned sheepishly and crushed the cigarette under his boot. 'Judging from the ground, you've had plenty *Staff Sergeant*. Tough day?'

'You said it.'

'Here,' Cope slid over a red packet.

'Skittles?' Liam arched a brow, but opened the package. The candy was bright, artificial, almost absurdly sweet.

'I'm addicted,' Cope went on. 'Too hot for chocolate, food's crap, so Skittles it is. Slovacek's sister sent me a whole month's supply. If anyone asks—she's my girlfriend.'

Liam nearly choked. 'Your what?'

'Girlfriend,' Cope said proudly.

'I thought you were -,'

'Oh, I am,' Cope said, with a smile. 'Definitely. I checked.'

'You...checked?' Liam questioned frowning: if Cope wanted to take his mind off of things, he was definitely doing a good job.

Cope waved his hand. 'Slovacek's idea - only confirmed what I was already pretty sure about. And then his sister took me to a gay club just to be *extra* sure.'

Liam blinked. Cope. At a gay club. He couldn't even picture it—this nervous, bright-eyed kid doing something Liam himself had never dared.

'Her name's Ana. She's a bankteller - *and* a waitress. She's supporting

her girlfriend through college.'

'So, she's your beard?'

'Technically I'm hers,' Cope said with a shrug of his shoulders. 'Her boss at the bank is this conservative nightmare - *like no jeans to work conservative*. Now he's met her Marine boyfriend he doesn't even blink when she mentions her roommate. You should've seen me, I was very convincing. Very butch. Borrowed one of Slovacek's plaid shirts and everything.' He made a face. 'It was exhausting.'

Liam shook his head with a wry grin. His fingers were itching for a cigarette but instead he popped another candy. 'Would be a whole lot easier though, wouldn't it?'

Cope didn’t need to ask what he meant. His voice went quiet. 'Maybe. But easy’s never really been my thing.'

Liam hummed, thoughtful.

'Not being a Marine would be easier too,' Cope said softly. 'Still wouldn’t trade it.'

The words lingered between them, warm and sharp all at once. Liam leaned back against the wall, watching the faint orange glow of the horizon. Cope’s shoulder brushed his again—light, unassuming, steady. Maybe there were worse things than company...

Chapter 7: Chapter seven

Chapter Notes

> This is getting a bit more attention than I thought it would...which is really great because that means there's people watching the show and I really, really want a second season! :-)
>
> So here we are, another short little meeting!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite the workload and the generally shitty conditions, Cam was actually enjoying his time at Mogadishu Airport. Ray - still off duty thanks to his injury - had been joining him every day, pitching in where he could and talking about everything from the camp's pitiful water pressure to who the best Beatle was. It was good. It was easy.

Somalia wasn't easy, it was humanitarian tragedy, and it was easy to lose yourself in the misery of it all. But if there was one thing his childhood - and his sexuality - had taught Cam, it was how to compartmentalize. Time with Ray was a bright, happy bubble, and he relished it. He didn't even mind being turned into Ray's personal lackey: tying a bag around his hand so he could shower, shaving him, carrying his tray at the mess...

'Meatloaf,' Ray muttered full of disdain as they waited in line. 'It's not meatloaf - it's mush with ketchup.'

"It's not so bad," Cam said, carefully balancing both trays. "You're just spoiled because your mom actually cooked. On the Barbara Cope TV-dinner scale, this rates as above decent."

"And people wondered why you were underweight."

Cam cracked a grin — then froze. His eyes caught on a familiar shock of strawberry-blond hair.

Sullivan.
He was sitting with Staff Sergeant Maitra and two other men. He looked… relaxed. Or at least more relaxed than he had two days ago, during their... *moment*?

Okay, fine - not a *moment moment*. But it had been *something*. Something tangible, just like the way Sullivan had steadied him on the

stairway to heaven, the look he'd given him by the dumpster, and that oddly personal, almost-goodbye out in the swamp.

"It could've been a moment," the voice in his head said dryly. "If you'd put on your big boy pants and actually made a move."

"I like my teeth where they are, thank you."

"He's stuck here just like you - surrounded by sand and dicks. You think he's not as horny as a rhino?"

Cam sighed under his breath. "We're in the Marines. We're always surrounded by sand and dicks or mud and dicks. That's not new! And just because he's-," he swallowed, "gay, and maybe horny, doesn't mean he wants to sleep with me."

"He grabbed your thigh, genius."

"Stop talking."

"Ray thinks he's obsessed with you."

"Ray also thinks Lennon was a better songwriter than McCartney and that yellow is the best Gatorade flavour. I love him, but his opinion is questionable — at best."

"But you felt it too!"

"I also thought Nash was flirting with me. And Jones. And remember that ten-minute stretch where we thought Slovacek was into me? My radar is broken, okay? If Ray's opinion is questionable, mine's downright tragic." He sighed. "Do I have a connection with Sullivan? Yeah. Is it probably platonic? Honestly... probably."

"Maitra sent you to talk to him - that must mean something."

"It means his straight friend probably thought he needed gay support or something."

"Honestly, what does that even mean?"

'Yo, Cope!'

Cam looked up to see Sergeant Maitra waving him over.

'Shit, is that Sullivan?' Ray murmured.

Cam nodded tightly.

'C'mere,' Maitra said, gesturing for them to sit.

The two unfamiliar faces looked up curiously; Sullivan didn't look up at all. Cam hesitated, frozen for a beat until Ray nudged him forward.

'Staff Sergeant Maitra,' Cam said politely as he set the trays down. Years of dodging trip attempts in school cafeterias had made him a tray-balancing pro.

'We're not on a mission,' Maitra said. 'No need for rank — we ain't that prissy.'

Cam grinned. 'This is Ray McAffey.'

'Another DI Sully survivor?' Rob asked.

'Yes, sir,' Ray said with a nod, flashing Sullivan — who still hadn't looked up — a careful grin.

'Shit, DI Sully,' said the stocky African-American man beside him. 'You poor S.O.Bs.'

'This is Williams,' Maitra said. 'Blondie over there's Lambert. *Sunshine* here doesn't need an introduction.'

Finally, Sullivan looked up — only to glare at Maitra, his jaw set in a look of disaproval Cam was very familiar with. Cam's stomach twisted with dissapointment. So he looked away and busied himself cutting Ray's meatloaf and carrots.

It took him a beat to notice the four sets of eyes on him - staring at him in bewilderment.

"Way to look like a soccer mom," his inner voice groaned.

"It's not like Ray can cut his own food."

"Remind me is there a Marine newsletter where this sort of thing gets publicised or are they supposed just be able to smell weakness from a mile away?"

"Oh. Right."

'Uh, Ray had an accident,' Cam blurted, waving the knife vaguely at his friend as his cheeks burned. 'Can't use that hand.'

Ray lifted his bandaged hand with a grin. 'Caught a burn batting away an explosive. Got a blister the size of a baseball under there.'

'Shit, man, burns are the worst,' Williams said, making a face. 'Hell of an infection risk out here.'

'Yeah, they benched me for three weeks,' Ray said.

'Sully once burned his hand during weapons systems training,' Maitra said with a sly look.

'No,' Sullivan said immediately, tone firm and flat.

'He was insufferable for weeks,' Maitra continued, unfazed.

'Oh man, I remember that,' Williams grinned. 'We had a darts tournament to decide who got to drown his miserable ass.'

Maitra's grin turned feral. 'And that, boys, is how we found out our Bobby here jerks off with his left hand.'

Lambert burst out laughing. And Ray hid his a laugh behind a cough. But Cam nearly choked on a carrot. Logically, he knew Sullivan probably jerked off...but somehow that just didn't compute with the man who seemed so above everything.

'Hey, asshole,' Sullivan said, tone resigned, 'how about the time our platoon had to run laps in our skivvies and take a freezing shower because our DI caught you with your hand down your pants on fire watch?'

Cam couldn't help it — he laughed too. And if anything, Maitra looked smug.

'I was eighteen,' Maitra said. 'Went from jerking it daily to cold turkey for a week. Only thing I regret was getting caught before I was done.'

'Jesus,' Lambert said, shaking his head. 'You've got issues. You get off on being yelled at or something?'

The conversation rolled on, but Cam's focus drifted. Lambert was *handsome*: blond, broad-shouldered, tan, with an easy grin. His gaze lingered a beat too long - just enough to notice the faint smell of cigarette smoke that clung to him. He quickly looked away - a little look couldn't hurt but he hadn't survived this long by openly staring at other men - and met Sullivan's eyes. Blue, sharp, cold. He looked

pissed.

Cam flushed, ducking his head.

"Someone's jealous," his inner voice sang.

"Someone's angry I was lusting over his friend."

"He is pretty lustable. Shame he smells like Barbara."

"Really? You had to drag Mom into this?"

"At least now you'll never pop a boner because of Sullivan's friend."

Cam stabbed a potato. Hard.

Then Ray's voice cut through. 'It's just a burn. Cam got shot in Kuwait.'

The clatter of steel on steel was deafening. Cam flinched.

Sullivan had dropped his fork. 'You got *shot*?' he demanded, voice low and sharp enough to draw blood. It shouldn't have been that surprising honestly. He was in the Marines.

"Maybe he's worried!"

'It was a graze,' Cam said quickly, waving it off.

Lambert whistled. 'Enemy contact?'

Cam grimaced, eyes flicking between them. 'No. Friendly.'

'Holy shit,' Williams muttered. 'That's some heavy shit for a baby Marine.'

'He's not telling us something,' Sullivan said, eyes fixed on Cam, sending a nervous chill up his spine. He turned to Ray. 'McAffey?'

Ray straightened automatically under that voice - still conditioned from Sullivan's time as their DI 'Hicks was bored. So he was fooling around with his rifle. Tried a trick move-,'

'Fucking *Hicks* shot you?' Sullivan boomed.

Williams snorted. 'Of course Hicks shot him. Name like that, how couldn't he be a dumbfuck.'

'*Thaddeus* Hicks,' Ray added helpfully. Cam shot him a look that was answered with a grin.

Lambert barked a laugh. 'Thaddeus Hicks? Jesus. Cope, was he in full Confederate gear when he shot you, or just waving the flag?'

'I don't think he meant to-,' Cam started.

Maitra cut in, eyes sharp. 'You *think* he didn't mean to? So there's a chance he did?'

Cam froze. Because honestly? Who had ever understood what went on in Hicks' head?

'I think— I'm pretty sure that if he'd actually wanted to kill me, he would've done a better job. Sure, Hicks is... a *wackadoodle* — but he was always pretty competent with the shooting and the fighting stuff.'

Maitra frowned before turning to Sullivan. 'Why the fuck did you let a *wackadoodle* like that join our fucking Marine Corps?'

'Kid had a couple screws loose, but I didn't think he was an actual wackjob!' Sullivan snapped.

'He shot Cope!'

'*Graze* — he grazed me,' Cameron said weakly.

'Your upper thigh, Cam,' Ray said. 'If he'd actually hit you, you could've died. So stop defending him.'

'Did he get a discharge?' Williams asked. 'Pretty huge fuck-up, shooting your buddy.'

'Got transferred out to somewhere he'd be less trouble,' Cam said. 'Haven't seen him since.'

'That's it? A transfer?' Sullivan demanded, his tone seething — a low burn just under control.

Cam shrugged. 'It was classified an accident. And I think it was.'

'Plus our Sergeant hit him in the face with his own rifle,' Ray said with a grin. '*Twice*.'

The chuckles that followed Ray's comment rippled around the table before fading into the general hum of the mess hall. And soon they fell

into easier conversations

It took a while before Cam dared to chance another look at Sullivan, but when he did, Sullivan was already watching him. His elbows rested loosely on the table, shoulders angled just slightly toward Cam — casual to anyone else, but not to him. That hard, assessing stare made it feel like his heart was laid bare under the harsh fluorescent light.

'You really think it was an accident?' Sullivan asked quietly, the question meant for him alone.

Cam hesitated, then nodded. 'Yeah. Hicks never disliked me. He's just... Hicks, I guess.'

Sullivan's jaw tightened. 'You always did see the best in people. Even when they didn't deserve it.'

Oh.

'Somebody has to,' Cam said, managing the ghost of a smile.

For a heartbeat, Sullivan's expression softened; his eyes flicking over Cam's face, something raw and unguarded stirring there, before he pushed back his tray and stood.

'Next time trouble comes looking for you, Cope,' he said, voice low, 'try ducking. You've had your fair share.'

Cam huffed a quiet laugh, but the sound fell flat. The chair scraped, the noise swallowed by the room. Sullivan paused for half a breath - long enough that Cam thought he might turn back - then, after a quiet word to his friends, he was gone.

Cam stared at the space he'd left behind, pulse still thrumming in his throat.

Ray leaned in, voice low. 'That... wasn't very *straight*.'

Cam shook his head, a small grin tugging at his lips. 'No,' he said softly. 'Guess it wasn't.'

Chapter End Notes

I honestly loved Hicks in the show as comic relief, but my partner (who has done a few rotations as a DI in our European army - and loved the show!) said Hicks should've been kicked out from the

get go and thought it was weird the DIs never focused on him.

So, yeah I might have used that as a plot device. But no hate - thought the actor was honestly brilliant.

Chapter 8: Chapter eight

Chapter Notes

> I got a lot of positive feedback on my last chapter and it might have inspired me a bit to - you know, gently start something up ;-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The base had quieted down hours ago, the noise of the day giving way to the distant murmur of whoever was on night rotation and the gentle buzz of the floodlights casting long shadows across the gravel.

Cam wasn't on night rotation. Not *officially*, at least. Although it sure felt like it.

The past few days had been intense: mornings and nights packed with activity as everyone in comms and navigation worked to get everything up and running again. And now - after one last push - Mogadishu Airport was finally back to being operational.

Too bad Cam was too dead on his feet to really appreciate it. Maybe he'd feel proud come morning, but right now all he could think about was his paper-thin mattress and scratchy sleeping bag - both suddenly very alluring.

He didn't expect to see anyone out this late without an actual purpose. But halfway down the path between the airport and the barracks, a familiar shape stood by the fence, smoke curling up from the cigarette between two fingers.

Sullivan..

He didn't look up when Cam approached. 'You're supposed to be asleep, Cope.'

'So are you.' Cam huffed a laugh. 'We got everything fixed tonight. Couldn't stop right before the finish line, you know?'

Sullivan nodded, flicking ash into the dirt. 'Rob and his boys are on perimeter check. I don't like it when they split us up and it's not me on his six.'

Cam smiled gently at the admission. And for a moment, silence

stretched between them - comfortable, almost. The distant hum of generators filled the space where words might've gone. Cam leaned against the fence, close enough to smell the faint tang of tobacco and soap.

'I wasn't lying,' he said quietly. 'About Hicks. I really do think it was an accident.'

Sullivan let out a slow breath, smoke trailing from his lips. 'Guy was off - we should've noticed that in boot camp instead of focusing on...' He shook his head. 'Oversight could've gotten you killed.'

'It didn't,' Cam said, managing a half-smile. 'And I got a friend out of it so...'

'Slovacek?'

Cam nodded.

'He turned out good, didn't he? It's good McKinnon gave him a real shot,' Sullivan said, his tone softening. 'I'm glad he has your six, Cope. You've got good people in your corner.'

'So do you.'

Sullivan took another drag. The light from the cigarette flared briefly between them, catching the edges of his face. 'Took me a little longer to realise,' he said exhaling, the stream of smoke drawing Cam's eyes to his mouth. 'I tend to look for the worst in people...I'm sorry, Cope.' The words hung there, heavier than they should have been. When Cam turned, Sullivan was watching him again - those pale blue eyes shadowed, unreadable. 'Get some sleep, Cope,' he said at last, quieter now, almost gentle. 'You look like hell.'

'Thanks, sir,' Cam murmured.

Sullivan's mouth twitched, the ghost of a smirk. 'Always so damn polite.' He stubbed out the cigarette, his hip brushing Cam's as he moved. 'Goodnight, *Cam*.'

It wasn't just the use of his first name that caught him off guard - it was the way Sullivan said it. Soft. Careful. *Maybe even sweet.*
By the time Cam found words again, the other man was already walking away, hands shoved deep in his pockets, shoulders squared against the night. Cam stayed where he was, staring after him - again - and the echo of his name still warm in his chest.

"I'd be so much angrier about him leaving all the time if he didn't look so good walking away," his inner voice sighed.

"He said my name."

A snort. "Said your name? He might as well have moaned it. God, I think we need a cigarette after that."

"It wasn't like that it was...sweet."

"Still think it's platonic?"

"No - but that doesn't mean he wants it to be anything more than what it is."

"Spoilsport."

He didn't end up gettinh much sleep that night.
He was stuck. Stuck on memory of Sullivan saying "*Goodnight, Cam*" in that *tone*. It kept looping back, like a song he couldn't switch off.

And at breakfast - *God at breakfast.*

He'd *tried* to be polite company. *Tried* to listen, to laugh at the right times. But his eyes betrayed him - flicking unbidden around the mess, looking. Finding.

Him.

Sullivan was there. Coffee in hand, posture as rigid as ever, but the dark circles under his eyes gave him away. Their gazes met for half a second - long enough for Cam's heart to trip - before Sullivan looked away, just a little too fast.
It shouldn't have stung. But it did. And it must have shown.

'You okay, Cam?' Ray asked, frowning.

'Fine,' Cam said quickly - too quickly. He dropped his eyes to his tray. 'Didn't sleep much.'

'Yeah, no kidding.' Ray snorted. 'You look like someone ran you over with a Humvee.'

Cam smiled, weakly. 'Feel like it too.'

'You've been working hard,' Ray said knocking their shoulders together. 'Go enjoy your day off - take a nap. You've earned it, Cam.'

Cam risked another glance, just in time to see Sullivan leave. 'Yeah, I think I will. See you later?'

'Come find me when you're up?' Ray asked.

“I will,” Cam promised, hurrying to his feet.
He dropped off his tray before setting off after Sullivan. His light jog catching up with the man’s long strides.

"What am I doing?" He asked himself, heart hammering in his chest and tongue thick and clumsy.

"You're making a move, Marine! Oorah - now go and get some!"

'Staff Sergeant!' He called out, his tone steadier than he'd feared.

Sullivan froze. His broad shoulders squared before he turned around, expression impassive but something flickered in his eyes. Surprise, maybe. Or something harder to name. 'Corporal Cope,' he greeted with a nod, his posture not relaxing even a smidge.

Cam hesitated. 'Morning.'

Sullivan eyed him critically. 'You get any sleep?'

'Not much. But, *uh* - how about you?'

'Enough,' he said dismissively. 'Did you need anything, Cope?'

'*Cam*,' he blurted out. 'You called me *Cam*, last night.' He took a deep breath and searched the Sergeant's pale blue eyes. 'I like it when you call me Cam.'

For a second, Sullivan just stared at him—frozen—and Cam could see the way he swallowed down his words, his jaw working, Adam’s apple bobbing. 'Did I?'

Cam nodded.

'Didn't notice,' Sullivan said, tone neutral. *Too* neutral. 'I was tired. Long day.'

Cam wanted to let it go - to nod, say yeah, sure, let the older man off the hook, pretend it hadn’t meant anything. But he couldn't. Not really.

Then, quietly - almost gently - Sullivan said, 'Don’t read into

everything, Cope. Not everything means *something*.'

Cam grimaced. 'Maybe not,' he said. 'But… some things do.'

Sullivan exhaled, like the conversation had edged too close to something he couldn't afford.
"I need to go - I'm heading out."

Cam bit his lip, eyes dropping in dissapointment. Sullivan had rolled his sleeves to his elbows, the fabric stretching across his forearms as he fisted his hands. 'Forget it. I guess it wasn't— I mean: stay safe, okay? See you around, *Staff Sergeant*.'

And for a moment, Sullivan's expression broke—the briefest flash of *something*, gone almost before Cam could be sure he'd seen it.

Sullivan nodded. 'See you around, Cope.'

The message had been loud and clear.
Did it hurt? Of course it did.
Was he going to drop it? Absolutely. He was going to avoid Sullivan like the plague from now on - his already fragile confidence didn't need another blow. It couldn't handle another blow, no matter what that obnoxious voice in his head claimed.

What had he even been thinking? Of course Sullivan wasn't interested. Sullivan was… *Sullivan — unshakable, unreadable, a man built from rules and restraint.* And Cam was still caught somewhere between *Recruit Cope* and *Cope, the baby gay Marine.*

Ray let him sulk. Understanding, sympathetic Ray, who grimaced and nodded in all the right places while Cam recounted the whole mortifying story. He didn't offer advice, didn't try to fix it — just sat beside him while Cam stared out at the horizon, blank and bitter. And though Cam loved Ray's quiet loyalty, he found himself missing Slovacek — loud, reckless Slovacek, who would've made a face, maybe asked if he needed to *punch Sullivan's pretty jaw back into alignment* before laughing and saying something flippant like: *"Man the fuck up, Cope. Plenty of dick left in the desert."*

Because yeah — Cam knew he was sulking. He knew, logically, he had no right to. Sullivan had never promised anything, never given him reason to hope there was more between them than a brotherhood born of dust, duty, and a shared secret. It was just Cam who had gone and made things *weird*.

'Yo, Ray! Hey, Cope!´

It was Stan, one of Ray's platoon guys — freckled, broad-shouldered, the kind of Wisconsin farm boy who still read his bible every evening. The bandage at his neck peeked out from under his collar, a stark white reminder of the burns he'd gotten when the airport was hit.

'What's up, Stan?' Ray said. Cam gave a polite nod and a faint grin.

'You heading to the field hospital for bandage change?'

Ray shook his head. 'Already went this morning. Why?'

'Just thought I'd warn you if you hadn't — they're slammed right now. Some accident.'

'*Accident*?' Cam asked, the word snagging like barbed wire in his chest.

'Patrol squad ran into trouble near Bardera. Humvee flipped. Couple of guys hurt.'

Cam froze. Sullivan was out on patrol. He swallowed, his stomach turning. "Anyone bad?"

Stan shrugged. 'Didn't sound like it, but… maybe. They looked pretty swamped.'

Cam was already on his feet before he realised it. 'I'm going— he was… a friend of mine was out. I just need to check.'

Ray rose too, hands raised in calm. 'It's okay, Cam. Want me to come with?´

Cam shook his head, already half-turned toward the tents. 'No — I just want to make *sure*.'

'I get it,' Ray said softly.

'Hope your buddy's okay, Cope,' Stan added with a sympathetic smile

'Thanks,' Cam murmured, and then he was jogging, boots crunching on the gravel, heart hammering against his ribs.

No one looked twice at a Marine running through camp, but to Cam it felt like everyone's eyes followed him — like they saw right through him.

Like they knew.

By the time the field hospital came into view, his lungs burned. The place was busy but not chaotic — movement, yes, but not panic. No shouting, no blood. Relief hit hard and sudden. He bent double, palms on his knees, trying not to throw up.

'You okay there, Cope?' It was Maitra. Arms crossed, expression drawn but calm - the picture of controlled exhaustion

'I… I don't know,' Cam said clumsily as he wiped his sweaty hands on his pants.

Maitra's mouth tugged into a weary half-smile. 'He's okay. Banged up, but thank fuck Bobby was wearing his seatbelt.'

'Good,' Cam breathed out, voice cracking. 'That's...that's good. I'll -,'

'You mind sitting with him a while?' Maitra cut in. 'I've got a debrief.'

'*Me*?' Cam squeaked, eyes wide. His pulse kicked up again.

'You,' Maitra said firmly. 'Stubborn bastard didn't want to be put under — had to give him an IV.'

Cam frowned. 'Why did he need to be sedated?'

'Bit of shrapnel from the Humvee in his shoulder,' Maitra said. 'Looked worse than it was. All gold star now — he'll make a full recovery. Just a bit out of it, disoriented. It helps to have a familiar face around. And, well,' a sly look. 'The fact he thinks yours is *pretty* doesn't hurt.'

Cam flushed. 'I don't think he'd appreciate-,'

'Yes, he would,' Maitra interrupted, shaking his head with a muttered, 'the stupid prick.'

He ushered Cam into the tent. The air was thick with antiseptic and the hum of generators. Rows of empty cots stretched out under the canvas; the occupied ones were sectioned off with curtains, but Cam could hear low voices and restless movements.

Maitra led him to the last bed, exchanged a few quiet words with someone, then clasped Cam's shoulder. 'I'll be back as soon as I can, okay? If he wakes up and asks, tell him everyone's okay. Lamb hit his head and Daniels broke an arm - nothing big.'

Cam nodded. 'Got it.'

Maitra pulled him into a brief, solid hug, slapping his shoulder once. 'Thanks, Cope. I'm glad you came. And Bobby might not say it, but he is too.'

Cam watched him leave — half-stunned by the unexpected warmth and gruff show of affection — then took a steadying breath and stepped past the curtain.

Sullivan looked paler than ever, a sheen of sweat on his skin, but alive. *Whole*.

He was half-propped on his side, IV taped to his arm, shoulder bandaged tight. A faint crease cut through his brow even in sleep, like he was arguing with his dreams. His dog tags caught the low light, flickering when he breathed.

Cam's pulse stumbled. He's fine. He's fine. He's fine. He repeated it until he half believed it.

'Cope.' The voice was gravel and smoke, barely there. Sullivan's eyes blinked open, unfocused at first, then sharpening a little. They were bloodshot only emphasising how incredibly blue they were. 'You're here.'

'Yeah,' Cam said softly, dropping into the rickety chair beside the bed. 'Maitra asked me to sit with you.'

Sullivan huffed — something between a laugh and a sigh then grimaced and reached for his shoulder. 'Of course Robby thinks I need a babysitter,' he rasped.

'Or maybe just some company,' Cam offered, trying for lightness. 'How're you feeling?'

Sullivan's gaze drifted to the ceiling. 'Floaty. Like my head's not attached - and nauseated.' He swallowed. 'You ran all the way here?'

Cam blinked. 'How'd you—?'

'You've got that look,' Sullivan said. 'Like you sprinted through hell and forgot to stop.' His words were a little slurred, the edges softened by whatever they'd given him.

Cam sat with his elbows on his knees, leaning forward. 'You scared

me,' he admitted quietly.

Sullivan's eyes fluttered half closed, the crease between them deepening. 'Didn't mean to.'

'I know.'

The generator buzzed steadily. Canvas rustled. But just when Cam thought he'd drifted off again, Sullivan's hand twitched on the blanket, fingers brushing near Cam's elbow — not quite reaching, but close enough that Cam could feel the warmth radiating off him.

Cam hesitated, then reached out, threading their fingers together. The contact sent a shock of heat up his arm.

'You're always worried about people,' Sullivan murmured. 'I told you not to do that.'

Cam smiled faintly, thumb tracing slow circles over Sullivan's knuckles — though he wasn't sure who he was soothing more. 'Somebody has to.'

'You shouldn't worry about me - I'm an asshole. All I do is fuck people up.'

Cam froze, heart giving a painful lurch. 'You don't.'

Sullivan's eyes opened again, softer now. 'You… you looked sad when I left. You always do. 'Cause I keep saying the worst *shit* to you because...'
He frowned, like the thought hurt. 'I don't like that. Don't want that.'

'I'm fine,' Cam said automatically.

Sullivan's lips curved; the ghost of a smirk, blurred by sedatives. 'You're a fucking liar, Cope.'

Cam's throat felt tight. 'Get some rest, sir.'

Sullivan's gaze lingered, slow and heavy. 'Cam.'
It came out low, thick, like the word had weight. Cam stilled as Sullivan squeezed his hand. 'Don't call me 'sir' - not now - my name… it's *Liam*.'

'You're high,' Cam whispered, smiling despite himself.

'Maybe.' Sullivan's eyes fluttered closed, pale lashes fanning against

his freckles. 'It’s nice,' he murmured, squeezing Cam’s hand again. 'This is nice. I’m just… so tired, Cam.'

Cam leaned forward, heart thudding hard. He brushed a hand through Sullivan’s sweat-damp hair, soft now the product was gone. 'It’s okay. You can sleep some more, Liam. I’ll stay with you, okay?'

And then he was gone again, breath evening out, the hard lines of his face softening into something almost gentle.
Cam sat there long after, holding his hand, listening — to the steady rhythm of Sullivan’s breathing, and to the small, stubborn hope unfurling in his chest like a heartbeat he couldn’t quiet.

Chapter End Notes

So handholding in chapter eight - that's like at least a medium burn in Jane Austen math, right?

I hope it felt kind of right - it felt right to me :-)

Chapter 9: Chapter nine

Chapter Notes

> I don't know how I'm being this productive right now, but maybe that's because I have figured out where I'm steering this!
>
> And I'd like to apologise for this before you start, but I just don't see someone like Sergeant Sullivan making things easy for himself...like ever.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He drifted in and out. The edges of things blurred: voices too far away, lights too bright, the taste of metal thick on his tongue, the feel of cotton wool in his mouth. The air smelled of antiseptic and canvas. He tried to shift, but his body didn't seem to listen — heavy, detached, as if it belonged to someone else. His shoulder burned something fierce.

For a moment, he couldn't tell if he was dreaming or remembering: a flash of movement, shouting, the world rolling over itself - and then - *God, everything fucking hurt.*

'Careful, careful,' someone said quietly, gently. Then he felt it: a steady touch to his chest and warmth against his palm, fingers curling around his.

Liam blinked up through bleary eyes. '*Cam*,' He muttered, unsure if the name actually left his lips or just filled his head.

'Does it hurt? Do you -, should I get someone?' Cam's tone was nervous, his blue eyes wide with worry and Liam could feel him trying to pull his hand free.

He didn't want him to let go.
Something in him loosened at the thought - something deep and unguarded he didn't have the energy to shut down. 'Don't,' he slurred, tongue thick in his mouth as he tightened his grip on those slim, calloused fingers. 'I'm okay.'
The hand stayed. Cope stayed. And he closed his eyes after that, eyelids too heavy, head to fuzzy to put up much of a fight against the bone-deep exhaustion dragging hum under, and he let the hum of the generator fade into something that almost sounded like breathing, steady and close.

The next time his eyes opened, the light had shifted to greyer. His throat felt raw, his head heavy. There was a quiet rustle nearby; the scrape of a chair and the low murmur of voices. He turned his head, slowly, carefully, everything aching - and found Cope slumped forward beside the bed, chin on his chest, fast asleep, fingers tangled with Liam's...

Fuck.

He remembered flashes: pain, the sting of antiseptic, Robby holding him down as they jabbed a needle into his arm - and that voice cutting through the haze. Calm. Familiar. Grounding. His pulse thudded too loud in the quiet. He should pull his hand away - someone could walk in. Somebody probably already had.

'*Don't*,' Rob's gruff voice ordered.

Liam blinked, finding Rob sitting on a stool beside the cot, looking ten shades of exhausted, as relief, plain and unguarded, flickered across his face. 'I held your hand too - and Lamb's. It's fine. You're hurt, so *it's very straight*," Rob said in a low voice. 'So don't fucking freak out and just let yourself *hold his goddamn hand,* Bobby.'

Liam blinked, dread pooling in his already upset stomach. 'Lamb?' He rasped.

'Still hazy, huh?' Rob leaned forward. 'We've done this song and dance twice already.'

Liam tried to remember but drew a blank.

'Lamb's okay. Thought he was done for for a sec though,' Rob huffed. 'Had pupils the size of fucking dinner plates and couldn't string a sentence together. But It's fine. He's fine - just the mother of all concussions. Dude thinks he's partying on fucking Mars with E.T. or some shit.'

Liam exhaled, eyes fluttering the memory of Lambert bleeding from his nose, pale as death and unmoving playing behind his eyelids.

'Me?'

'Just banged up - don't worry about it.'

'What's with my head?'

'You wanted IV sedation you stubborn prick. Takes about a day to get that out of your system,' Rob said. 'So don't worry, your head is fine, pretty boy.'

Liam groaned. He hadn't touched a drop of alcohol in two years to keep his head straight and here he was, worse than drunk.

'He's been here for two hours. Fell asleep about half an hour ago. He looked tired as fuck, so I just let him sleep,' Rob said conversationally.

Right. *Cope*.

For a long minute, Liam just watched him. He looked wrecked: hair sticking up in every direction, dark circles under his eyes, uniform creased. Something unspoken twisted in Liam's chest. Not guilt exactly, but something close.

'Stop drooling over government property, Bobby.' Liam's eyes snapped back to Rob, who smirked. 'Shit man, they really hit you with the good stuff, huh?'

'It's like I'm stuck in jell-o,' Liam muttered, blinking through the drowsiness. Everything felt heavy and slow, his mind lagging behind.

'Any pain?'

'A Humvee flipped on me,' Liam said. He shifted, then winced. 'There's pain.'

Rob huffed, still too tense to laugh. 'You scared the hell out of everyone.'

'Doubt it,' Liam muttered.

'Me,' Rob said simply, then nodded towards Cam. 'Him. Still going to pretend there's nothing going on here, brother?'

Liam sighed. 'Too tired for this, Rob.'

A large hand patted his ankle. 'Sleep, Bobby. I'll be on fire watch.'

Liam hummed, bleary eyes settling on Cope He should wake him, say something normal, make it less weird. But the words sat heavy on his tongue. So instead, he leaned his head back and shut his eyes again. Just for a minute, he'd let the world stay simple - no ranks, no explanations, no past mistakes - just the steady weight of Cope's hand in his and Rob on his six. He'd deal with the rest later.

It did take him a day to sleep off the drugs. And by the time he was lucid enough to worry, Cope was gone. Rob came by often, the rest of his unit too - just, *not Cope.*

He was part relieved, part dissapointed. And he worried about what he'd said. Had he pushed him away with more slurs, more dismissals? Or *even worse*...had he said something else he shouldn't have said: things like what he'd whispered to Aaron in the heat of the moment - *things that made good men run.*

It gnawed at him - made his stomach twist in away that had him avoiding his painkillers. He hated that shit anyway, and Liam didn't mind a little pain. Pain kept him grounded.

Still not even six hours after being released from the field hospital, Sullivan was sitting on the low wall behind the comms tent, his shoulder still bound but his movement mostly back. He'd been cleared for light duty, which in practice meant not much at all. For a man used to motion, it felt like punishment.

He heard footsteps before he saw him.

'Permission to sit?'

He didn't have to look up to know the voice.

Cam stood a few feet away, a water bottle in hand, squinting against the glare. His hair looked longe, or maybe just less regulation-sharp in the wind. So he wasn't avoiding him - *not really*

'Just sit, Cope,' Sullivan said, half-smiling. But, he didn't miss the flicker of something that passed over Cope's face. *So there was something.*

Cam dropped down beside him, their knees almost brushing. For a moment neither spoke and the air hummed with distant machinery.

'So, feeling better?' Cam asked finally. 'I mean you look better, so...'

'Mostly. They'll have me doing desk work for a while though.'

Cope nodded. 'That'll drive you nuts.'

'Already has,' Liam said, clearing his throat. 'Rob told me you were there...when I was out. I remember you being there.'

Cope's gaze flicked sideways, caught. 'He thought you'd want someone

familiar around.'

'And you volunteered?'

'I didn't *not* volunteer,' Cope said with a shrug.

'Heard you just showed up to make sure I was okay.'

'You're in my pack,' Cam said. A pause, a look and then a very quiet, '*Liam.*'
Liam swallowed hard, eyes fixed on the horizon, hoping to hide the way his pulse jumped. Cope looked away, voice less sure now. 'I was worried. I… I've been worried about you since bootcamp, I guess I—,'

'*Don't,*' Liam cut in - too fast, too rough. He immediately regretted the edge in his voice, and the way it had made Cope freeze up and flush, making him look too much like the young recruit he used to terrify.

'I'm sorry if I-'

'You didn't,' Liam said, making sure to keep his tone even this time. 'You didn't do anything wrong, Cope.' He swallowed, words feeling heavier than they should. 'But next time, don't run yourself ragged, okay? I'm not—' He stopped, something uncertain catching in his throat. 'I'm not going anywhere.'

Cam's lips twitched, faint and disbelieving . 'Yeah. We'll see about that,' he muttered.

'I don't remember much about when you came to see mee,' Liam said, careful, 'but I remember… you being there. Talking.'

Cope froze. 'You do?'

Liam nodded. 'Cope, did I say something to you that wasn't... *okay* while I was out of it?'

Cope's throat bobbed. He didn't answer right away. The silence between them was full, not awkward, just full. 'You said my name again,' Cope said finally.

'I did?'

'Yeah,' Cam said, trying for a smile, 'the entire time. And I know you said not everything has to mean something...but this does, okay? It means something to me.' His eyes were impossibly blue, honest and vulnerable.

It still knocked the wind out of Liam, how effortlessly Cope could sit in his own skin while he himself was constantly fighting against his. His heart pounded uncomfortably as he looked at him - too long, too hard - until Cam shifted, his confidence faltering under the weight of it.

'Cope…' Liam's voice came out low, rough with exhaustion. 'You're a good man.'

'That's not -'

'You are,' he said again, firmer now. 'You're *steady*. You care about people — even when it's hard.' He rubbed at the bandage on his shoulder, trying to ignore the deeper ache in his chest, the ghosts of his mistakes. 'You shouldn't waste that on someone who doesn't know what the hell to do with it.'

Cam frowned. 'That's not your choice,' he blurted.

'I think it is,' Liam said quietly, fists tightening on his thighs as he kept his gaze fixed on the horizon. He couldn't look at Cope — not if he wanted to keep his resolve. 'Because I know what can come next, and it's not good, Cope. It's awful, and it almost fucking killed me. I don't want that for you. I don't want to carry more blame, okay?'

The words hung between them for a long moment — raw, heavy. Cam's lips parted, then closed again. He didn't move.

Liam forced the next words out before he lost his nerve. 'I can be your friend, Cope. I can do that. But I can't be what you want.'

The silence that followed wasn't angry — just hollow. Cam nodded once, jaw tight, and Liam hated how small the gesture looked.

'Right,' Cam said finally, staring down at the dirt between his boots. 'Friendship,' he sighed. 'Guess I'll just have to take that. But for the record, that's not all I want.'

Liam closed his eyes, exhaling through the ache that bloomed in his chest. He couldn't look at him - not without forgetting every reason he had not to. So, they sat in silence for a while longer, side by side, both staring at the empty horizon. When the sun dipped lower, Liam pushed himself to his feet, grimacing as he flexed his injured shoulder. The pull of the stitches was a small, merciful distraction.

'You heading back?' Cope asked, and Liam hated how small he

suddenly sounded.

Liam nodded but didn’t move. He owed Cope something - honesty, maybe - and he refused to leave again like a coward. 'Thanks. For sitting with me. For... *everything*.'

Cam gave him a small, tired smile. 'You don’t have to thank me, *Liam*.'

The use of his name landed like a touch. He felt it - soft, unexpected, real. He covered it with a shake of his head and a faint grin. '*Cam*.' Cope looked up at him, and the look in his eyes made Liam feel even worse than he already did. His mouth opened, closed, then he just said, 'See you tomorrow.'

Cam stood, brushing the dust from his fatigues. 'See you around.' And then he was gone, gravel crunching beneath his boots, head high despite the sag in his shoulders.

Liam watched him go, then reached for a cigarette with trembling fingers. 'Friends,' he muttered under his breath. 'Sure. Let’s see how long that lasts.'

Chapter End Notes

One step forward, two steps back, right?

But don't worry - better days are up ahead!

Chapter 10: Chapter ten

Chapter Notes

> Something lighter this time around.
>
> Just to give me a chance to rummage around the big bag of tropes in search for a nice solution for our predicament :-)

It hadn't been a crushing rejection - not like the Jones debacle, or as mortifying as Nash's diary entry. Sullivan had been kind...in his own way.
But it had hurt. God, it had hurt more than he wanted to admit. Jones had been his first crush: an instant fascination and a childlike longing, that made him want to scribble their initials in hearts on a binder. But Sullivan. Sullivan had been his first… *something*.

Ray had been there when Cam stepped back into the comms tent after talking with Sullivan. All it took was one look at Cam's face, and Ray just... *knew*. So Ray - steady and dependable Ray - glued himself to Cam's side for the rest of the day as if proximity alone might keep something from breaking.

That night, when the camp quieted, they walked together, boots crunching on gravel under the wash of floodlights. And Cam told him everything. Everything he couldn't say in the light of day.

'I don't think even Sullivan understands Sullivan anymore, Cam,´ Ray said.´I mean - you remember boot camp, right? Look, I know, I can get...obsessive about being the best. But Sullivan? His whole identity is tied up in being the perfect Marine. Anything else?' He shook his head. 'I don't think he knows what to do with it.´

'Thats so not true.´Cam said making a face. '*Hello*: remember the inquest? That wouldn't have happened if he didn't,' - he cleared his throat - '*dabble*.'

Ray stopped and leaned back against a transport truck. He stared up at the sky, stars buried behind the camp's harsh floodlights. 'That's my point, Cam. He can't handle the fact that there's a part of him that isn't the perfect Marine. That's why he went all... psycho.'

'He's not a psycho, Ray.'

Ray straightened, scrunched up his face, and dipped into a gravelly imitation: 'Kill! Blood makes the grass grow!´

'That's…' Cam opened and closed his mouth. 'True. But -,'

'No! No buts, Cam,´ Ray said, pointing at him. 'I know this is hard for you, but you need to let this go. If you keep pushing… it's just going to hurt more. Sullivan isn't in the right headspace for... *whatever it is you want from him*,' he tacked on awkwardly.

Cam's chest tightened. Every part of him wanted to protest - to say: *I know and I still want him. I still want to try.* Ray hadn't been there when Sullivan's inhibitions had been lowered. When Sullivan had been Liam and all he'd wanted was for Cam to stay and hold his hand.

The words pushed up against his ribs, heavy and insistent. But something in Ray's face - the worry, the worn-in care made him swallow them down, and force a grin instead. 'You mean like…' He wiggled his eyebrows. 'The *gay stuff*.'

Ray smacked him with his cap. 'You're my best friend. I'm fine with the… *stuff*. I just don't want to think about the *other stuff*. Especially not when our old DI is on the other end of that other stuff.'

Cam laughed; honest, belly-deep. 'Oh my god, Ray. Is this the kind of sexy talk you seduced Alice with? How are you not still a virgin?'

Ray flipped him off with his good hand. 'Stop
deflecting.' Then softer: 'I mean it, Cam. Let it go. You don't deserve to get hurt like that.'

Cam let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. It trembled between them. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Yeah, I know.'

Ray smiled, crooked but warm. 'You're great - people know you´re great. Slovacek told me his sister had to beat them off you with a stick at that club.' He nudged him. 'You'll find someone. Someone just as great as you. Just give it time, okay?'

Cam tried to smile back. But the ache still tugged low and persistent, like a bruise that wasn't done blooming. The ache of knowing exactly what he was missing

After that, he'd given himself two days.
Just two days to sulk and to hide. But with air transport fully restored, he at least had enough work that avoiding common areas didn't earn

too much tutting from Ray, who'd also been cleared for non-physical duties, leaving him with less time for mother-henning.

And on the third day, the day he'd promised himself to put his big boy fatigues back on, he got a visitor. With the aid supply line restored, the aid convoys were back on, which meant every now and then, Slovacek would be dropping by to pick up some goods. Today was one of those days apparently.

He arrived the way he arrived everywhere — like gravity bent around him on impact. Shoulders squared, chest puffed out, gait loud enough to telegraph problem incoming. The people who knew him — Wood, Paulson — just exchanged knowing grins. While the other guys looked him up and down, trying to decide if he was dangerous, irritating, or both.
Most made up their minds when he bear-hugged Cam like a linebacker tackling a scarecrow, knocking the breath out of him.

'The new comms guy is a capital-R retard, Cope,' Slovacek declarered without preamble. 'I'm serious here - if he doesn't get his shit together, I'm pushing him under a truck. I'd get a medal; guy's so dumb.´

Cam grinned, wiping his hands clean on a rag. He knew Slovacek's moods like weather patterns by now. 'I'm sure it's not that bad.'

'He keeps whistling the first lines of *The Final Countdown.* All. The. Fucking. Time. I swear to God, Cope, I will punch his teeth—"

From across the tent, someone loudly whistled the opening bars.

Cam let out a burst of laughter, as Slovacek went rigid and spun with murder in his eyes — only to find Sergeant-Major Wood towering over him, arms crossed, smirking. Using every inch of his massive height.

'With all due respect, Sergeant-Major,' Slovacek said with a grin, 'and I mean that — but keep doing that and I'll grab a *stool* and punch your teeth in.'

Wood wasn't the type to lord his rank over anyone. Instead of barking insults and threats, he laughed — big and booming. 'Still a little shit, huh? You staying long?'

'Convoy leaves tomorrow at 0600 sharp.'

'Then get out of here and take Cope with you. He's practically moved in here. Take him for a walk before he gets *rickets*.'

'But-,'

´No buts, Cope. You're a Marine - *Marines go outside.'* Wood pointed at Slovacek. "And take this menace with you."

´Yes, sir.´ Slovacek said tossing a lazy salute before hooking an arm around Cam's shoulders and manhandling him toward the exit. Cam didn't resist. Fresh air didn't sound so bad. Besides — he could feel the world nudging him forward again, whether he was ready or not.

Outside, the sun hit them like a slap: all heat and dust and baked-in exhaustion. Slovacek didn't seem to notice - or care - as he bulldozed them away from the tent.

'You look like shit,' he said conversationally. 'Like, a specific kind of shit. The kicked-puppy kind.'

'Thanks,' Cam muttered.

'I'm a good friend,' Slovacek said, unbothered. 'So, where're we going? Wood didn't specify the activity, so that means I get to choose. And I choose chow.´

Cam huffed a small laugh. 'I'm not really hungry.´

Slovacek stopped dead, squinted at him, then shrugged. 'Fine. Don't eat. Watch me eat. Either way, I want to get a snack and you're coming.'

Cam rolled his eyes, but he followed. The mess tent was quieter between shifts, soft clatter and low voices drifting out the open flaps. It smelled like coffee and over-cooked meat.

As they stepped inside, Slovacek immediately veered toward the serving line with all the subtlety of a missile: chest puffed, arms swinging, like he owned the place.

Cam waited for him, gaze flicking for one brief, traitorous second toward the far corner where Sullivan usually sat. A small, stubborn part of him wondered if Sullivan had even noticed he'd been avoiding the mess tent.
But there was no familiar shock of red hair - just a group of SEALs watching Slovacek with interest. After Slovacek's last run-in with SEALs, Cam knew that spelled trouble.

'Come on,' Cam called after Slovacek reappeared with a bag of chips

and an energy drink, 'lets walk.´

'Yeah, yeah,' Slovacek muttered. 'Keep your pants on, Cope. I'm in no rush.'

They walked around base talking easily as Slovacek ate. Suddenly, he jerked his chin at the paperback sticking out of Cam's cargo pocket. ´You reading again?'

'Your sister sent it to me.'

'Of course she did.' Slovacek rolled his eyes. 'You know, it's a damn shame you two are bent. You'd be a match made in heaven.'

'A lot of people read,' Cam said before he shrugged. 'Besides, it helps me think.'

'Terrible hobby for a Marine,' Slovacek said flatly. 'Thinking for yourself just gets you in trouble.'

Cam snorted. 'You say that like you've ever tried it.'

Slovacek shot him a glare. 'I liked you better when I made you piss your pants. I-,'

Whatever else he said drowned out when Cam saw him. Liam Sullivan stepped out of a tent, collar undone, one arm still bound tight from his shoulder injury. He looked good… and he didn't even notice Cam.

The hit to his ego knocked the breath out of him.

'You having a seizure, Cope?'

Cam blinked. 'What?'

'You were out of it for a while man.'

'Just tired,' Cam said with an unconvincing grin.

Slovacek squinted but let it go. 'I've got things to do for tomorrow before I can call it a day. Go to the rec tent. Read your precious book. We'll go shoot the shit with McAffey when I'm done.'

Cam nodded. It would be nice to do some reading, relax a little before Slovacek inevitably dragged him back into chaos.

'See you in like an hour, Cope,' Slovacek said, already stomping away.

'It's nothing big. Just a few problems I need to yell at.´

And just like that, he was gone.

The rec tent had settled into a rare, comfortable lull. He picked a lawn chair in the shade and Cam actually felt relaxed when he reached for the dog-eared book in his pocket. But he'd barely made it past the first page when someone stopped in front of him - a SEAL with rolled-up sleeves, a medic insignia, steady hands, and an easy smile.

Dread coiled low. His history with SEALs wasn't great, and with Slovacek swaggering around again, Cam had half expected the trouble to boomerang. But he wasn't a kid anymore. He could handle bullies now - even without a bodyguard.

'Mind if I sit?' The medic's tone was light, casual - but his eyes were sharp, assessing, in that way medics always were.

Cam nodded, face impassive as he gestured to the empty chairs around him. 'Go ahead. Still plenty of room at the *Copa Somalia* if you hurry.'

The medic laughed under his breath as he sat, the metal chair creaking. 'That's an optimistic outlook, Marine.'

Cam shrugged, not entirely at ease with the sudden camaraderie — but nothing happened. They just sat. Cam didn't mind the silence, and the SEAL didn't either, tilting his face toward the late-afternoon sun like he had all the time in the world.

Cam was eight pages into his book when the SEAL finally spoke, voice quiet in that way that invited an answer but didn't demand one. 'You're Cope, right?'

Cam blinked, glancing up. *Ah. There was the trouble he'd been waiting for*. 'Uh, yeah.'

The medic grinned, all white teeth and a tiny gap in the front. 'I thought so. You were the guy whose buddy knocked out Ren Cooper, right?'

Cam froze for half a second.

"You're not a kid anymore, remember?" His inner voice said tetchily. "We don't let people push us around anymore - You're a goddamn Marine Cameron Cope. Act like it!"

'Yup,' he said, popping the p and closing his book. 'That a problem?'

The man shook his head, unbothered. 'Nah, man. Ren's in my team. I have to patch him up every other week. Guy's a magnet for trouble.'

Cam made a face. 'That's one way to put it.'

'He told me about some fight in the yard,' the medic said. 'Said he got clocked protecting our honour because some Marine couldn't keep his mouth shut.'

Cam couldn't help the a small, dry laugh that escaped him. 'That's… not quite how I remember it.'

'Oh, I bet it's not.' The grin widened. 'He deserved it, didn't he?'

Cope hesitated — the corner of his mouth twitching up before he gave in. 'Yeah,' he said, smiling properly now. 'He really did.'

The medic offered his hand. 'Sebastian Vega.'

Cam shook it. 'Cameron Cope. Nice to meet you.'

'Likewise.'

The moment lingered — comfortable. Sebastian leaned back, studying him with mild curiosity, giving Cam space to look back. He was young, about Cam's age, with a deep tan dusted in freckles, hair shaved in the buzzcut most SEALs preferred — but it suited him better than most.

'I heard your boxer friend is back on base. Is he sticking around?' Sebastian asked.

Cam shook his head. 'No, just here to pick up supplies.'

Sebastian clicked his tongue. 'Shame. I'd have loved watching him slug Ren again. Shut him up for two weeks. Shit was peaceful.'

'Please don't say that,' Cam said, setting his book on the ground between his boots. 'If my friend hears, he'll be insufferable. He already thinks he's Rocky — and I'd really like him to stay out of trouble for once.'

Sebastian laughed, hazel eyes crinkling. 'Wouldn't worry. I was just joking. Ren nearly shit his pants after your Staff Sergeant set him straight. Hell, I nearly did — and I was just a bystander. I doubt he'll

be bothering you anytime soon.'

Cam froze. 'Staff Sergeant? Was it...like a redhead with like a really, really intense stare?'

'Nah, dark hair — plenty intense though, but more in the "*let-me-shove-you-into-a-wall*" kind of way.'

"*Maitra, then. Not who we were hoping for, but I'll take it," his inner self said merrily. 'Also, the medic's kind of cute, isn't he? All tall, dark, and handsome. Perfect palate cleanser if you ask me."*

"No."

"Look, Sullivan is… Sullivan," he sighed. "But he said no. He was crystal clear. So let's not just… want. Let's actually shop around a little."

"And now I'm saying no."

"Boo."

Cam huffed softly. 'Would you believe me if I told you he's actually a really nice guy?'

To his surprise, Sebastian nodded. 'Yeah, totally. Ren's a brother, but he's a backwards bastard. I'm as likely to shoot him as die for him on a good day. Boys told me the broad strokes of what he said to you and… I just wanted you to know we're not all assholes, okay? And even if you were gay - fuck it man, that's totally cool with me.'

For a few seconds, Cam just blinked at him, brain catching up. Sebastian held his gaze steadily and Cam's fingers tightened around the warm metal arm of the chair, as the words finally landed.

"Is he implying… ?"

"I think he might be."

"A pink SEAL was not on my bingo card but it's definitely a good colour on him."

Sebastian wasn't as obvious as Jones, or as unreadable as Sullivan. He was comfortably in between — vague enough to keep Cam guessing, obvious enough not to drive Cam insane.

Cam smiled, small and genuine. 'Yeah, same here. It's 1992, right?'

'Damn straight,' Sebastian said with a crooked grin, before his eyes dropped down to Cam's half-forgotten book. 'So, what were you reading?'

'Oh, it's, uh… a new-ish Stephen King,' Cam said, glancing at the cover. 'Needful Things. A friend sent it to me. Supposed to be pretty good.'

'Stephen King? Hell yeah. I love *The Dark Tower*.'

From there the conversation was easy. They'd both read plenty of King novels, and their discussion flowed comfortably — right until Slovacek came back, eyeing Sebastian like an angry hornet.

'That's him, isn't it?' Sebastian asked, nodding toward Slovacek. '*Rocky*.'

Cam grinned. 'The resting bitch face really gives it away, huh?'

'Tell him I come in peace?' Sebastian chanced a casual salute that earned an affronted frown.

'I will,' Cam said with a fond glance toward Slovacek before hesitating. 'So… I'll talk to you later?'

'Definitely,' Sebastian said easily. 'Catch you around, Cam.'

"Yeah, catch you around," Cam said, trying to sound casual - failing - before turning to Slovacek with a final awkward wave.

"Waving? Really, Cam? Who are you? The Queen?"

Cam flushed red as Slovacek shot him a questioning look. 'He giving you trouble?'

Cam slung an arm around Slovacek's neck in a half-hug. Slovacek's face broke into a grin, letting him pull him down.

'Calm down, slugger. He's nice.'

Slovacek raised a brow. 'Nice, huh?'

Cam laughed — but as they walked away it fell flat in his ears. He glanced back over his shoulder: Sebastian still sat there, one hand shading his eyes, watching them go with an unreadable half-smile. Not challenge, not invitation — just something quietly warm.

Cam faced forward again, jaw tight. 'Yup, nice,' he muttered not sure who he was trying to convince.

Chapter 11: Chapter eleven

Chapter Notes

Surprise?

A while ago I had a small impulse of being a social butterfly and I somehow decide to host two parties this coming week. Since I probably won't have much time to write anything, I thought I'd post this now as a peace offering.

Plus your comments gave me enough inspiration to really breeze through this so, hope you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The mess tent was loud enough to pass for normal, but Liam felt every sound like a poke to the ribs. The scrape of metal chairs. The clatter of trays. Someone laughing two tables over. All of it needling at nerves already pulled too tight.
His shoulder throbbed in time with his heartbeat, reminding him - *every damn second - t*hat he was benched.

Light duty.
Like he was made of glass.

He should've been out with Rob and the boys. He should've been on recon, not sitting here useless. The thought of his brothers out there without him made Liam's teeth grind. Not because he didn't trust Robby, but because Liam wasn't watching his six. Things were starting to feel tense outside the wire; everyone in their unit sensed it, pressure building like the air before a storm.

He pushed his tray away, appetite gone. Seven days stuck behind the wire and he was crawling out of his own skin.

The fact that he hadn't seen Cope in five days and the guy had suddenly reappeared keeping strange company, and looking perfectly fine.
Unrelated. Completely. It had been *five* days, not *fifty*. Long enough to notice. Not long enough to admit he noticed.

Rob flopped down across from him with the graceless exhaustion of someone who'd been awake since before dawn. He'd just come back from a three-day stretch and the circles under his eyes told Liam

enough.

'You look like someone kicked your dog,' Rob said, already tearing into his food like a man starved.

Liam grunted. Hopefully that would end the conversation.

It didn't.

'Shoulder bothering you?'

'No.'

'So the scowl is just a personality thing today. Got it.'

Liam glared. Rob smirked.
There was comfort in the routine of it - even though Liam was one wrong breath away from punching something.

'Light duty making you twitchy?' Rob asked, voice softer now.

Liam shifted. 'Should be out there with you.'

'I know.' No judgment - just fact. 'But that's not the only thing eating you, is it? There's an iron rod up your ass, you're clenching your jaw so hard I'm waiting for it to crack, and - most damning of all - you're not even *singing*.'

'What?'

Rob huffed. 'You're always singing, man. No one complains because you sound great. But when you stop singing I know something's up.'

'Nothing's wrong.'

'Do I need to remind you of our no-bullshit agreement? Or should I call Tina?'

Liam scoffed, despite himself. Rob had a lot of great qualities: loyalty, steady nerves, a courage that bordered on stupid - but his best quality was the woman he'd married. *Tina Maitra*: a mouthy hairdresser with more heart than anyone Liam had ever met… and that terrified the absolute shit out of him.

'So this has nothing to do with a certain Corporal?'

Liam's fork paused mid-air as his eyes swept the table for

eavesdroppers. 'No.'

Rob made a doubtful, annoyingly gentle noise. 'Figured things might be weird since he's hanging around with fucking SEALs now instead of you.' He gestured vaguely toward where Cope was somewhere behind them.

Liam pointedly didn't look. But he felt the impulse like a hand on the back of his neck: just look. *Just once*. 'Nothing's weird.'

'So it doesn't bother you?'

The words landed like a punch and Liam's stomach tightened without permission. Liam's jaw tightened. 'Why would it?'

Rob's mouth twitched. 'It wouldn't. Obviously. Just mentioning it.'

Liam stabbed at the food he wasn't eating. 'I don't care what he does. He's a grown-ass Marine. If he wants to hang out with SEALs, that's on him.'

'Right.'

'I don't.'

Rob plucked the fork out of Liam's hand. 'You're gripping that thing like you're about to interrogate it.'

Liam forced his fingers to unclench. 'I'm fine.'

Rob watched him, arms crossed. The silence that followed wasn't comfortable. Not for Liam. Not with his mind full of things he had no business thinking: Cope's easy smile, the way he tilted his head when he listened, the way those damn eyes gave everything away. He shoved the thought down.

'Okay, look,' Rob said under his breath. 'I know you're hurt and worried, but you're the toughest bastard I know. You handle that shit. So don't lie to yourself about why you've been a nightmare all week.'

'I'm not -,'

'*You are*,' Rob said simply. 'And it's not the shoulder. It's your right one - you can still jerk off.'

Liam exhaled sharply, humorless.

'You could just be honest with me,' Rob said, irritation creeping in. 'That's what we promised *after...last time*, remember?'

Liam took a long breath.
He remembered. The months he thought Rob was gone for good - lost somewhere in fear and bitterness. How close Liam himself had come to ending everything. How things had broken and rebuilt after the fight, after Rob pulled him into a bone-crushing hug, after Tina kissed his forehead like he was something worth keeping.
He'd promised himself he wouldn't push that kind of affection away again.

So he did it. *He opened up - barely* - and tipped his chin in Cope's direction.

The movement was so small a lesser man would've missed it. Rob didn't. But the second he did, Liam felt something in his chest tighten - that awful, weightless drop of admitting something out loud, even without words. He hated how exposed it made him feel. Hated that Rob saw him so clearly.

And he hated how immediate Rob's grin was. 'Knew that shit would bother you. Saw him jogging with some of them when I left. Caught him at breakfast with McAffey and that medic when I came back. Doesn't seem like a big deal, Bobby. They're just talking. Hanging out. Asked around - they're decent enough guys.' A beat. 'For SEALs, I mean.'

Something in Liam's chest tightened in a way he refused to examine. The medic. He was exactly the kind of person Cope could talk to without worrying about rank or rules or...complications. And exactly the one who'd stood out. He was friendly, too friendly maybe: sat too close, touched too easily, listened too intently - *all the things Liam had spent years training out of himself.*

Rob nudged Liam's tray with a knuckle. 'Eat something before you vibrate out of that chair. And maybe don't stare at them like you're going to kill them. Jesus, Bobby—they're just talking. Big fucking deal —' Rob stopped. Recognition flickered across his face. 'Oh. Ohhh. Is one of them - ?' He wiggled his eyebrows in a way meant to signify: *gay*.

Liam nodded. 'Looks like it.'

Rob made a noise of wonder. 'You guys just keep surprising me.'

Liam huffed out a laugh.

'Doesn't have to mean anything, though. Might just be friends.' Then Rob set down his fork and studied him, his brow furrowed. 'Liam… did Cope turn you down?'

Liam's head snapped toward him before he could stop it.

Rob blinked. 'You turned him down? *Jesus, Bobby.'*

Liam looked away. Rob didn't know - couldn't know - what NCIS had said, what lines Liam had already crossed, how close he'd come to losing the only life that made sense to him. Even now, the memory still crept up on him: the cold room, the clipped voice, that horrible moment of realising the words inked above his heart could end everything he'd devoted his life to. Liam swallowed hard. No - he couldn't go through that again

'Look,' Rob said gently now. 'I know you think you did the right thing. And *shit maybe you did*. But—you're allowed to be selfish. And it wouldn't even be selfish if he wants it too, which I'm pretty fucking sure he does.'

'It's too risky,' Liam said. He knew it was true. Knew the cost of being caught. Knew he couldn't survive dragging someone else down with him.

'Cope doesn't care,' Rob said quietly. 'Guy's careful with who he trusts, sure, but you're the one choosing to miserable because of your… circumstances. Cope clearly isn't.'

As if on cue, from the corner of his eye, Liam saw Cope laugh - that unguarded, bright laugh that hit somewhere he didn't have words for.

And the medic was still there. Close.
Too close.

'I'm not miserable,' Liam said automatically, staring at the table.

'Of course not,' Rob said flatly. 'That's why my wife prays for your happiness every night. Because you're so not miserable.'

The words hit harder than Rob meant.
Tina and Rob were happy—*storybook happy*. And Tina, in all her wild optimism, wanted that for him too. She didn't understand. That kind of life wasn't for people like Liam. People who were too complicated,

too messed up, too much to ask someone to carry.

'I'm not miserable,' Liam repeated, more firmly. 'I'm glad for him. He deserves good company.'

Rob raised an eyebrow. 'Would be more convincing if you didn't say it like you're trying to convince yourself.'

'I'm not.'

'You sure?'

Liam didn't answer. He felt the tick in his jaw. Knew Rob saw it.

Rob leaned back, arms crossed. 'I know you, Bobby. I know this is eating you alive - *because you don't like being replaced.'*

Liam scoffed. 'I'm not -' But the words died. Because it did feel like that. Like he'd walked away from something fragile and real - *and someone else had stepped into the space he left behind.*

Rob gave him a pointed look.
Smug bastard.

Liam stepped out into the late-afternoon heat, intending to walk it off - ten minutes, twenty, didn't matter - anything to get the tension out of his skin. He loved Rob, and he knew Rob loved him, honestly and unconditionally, but opening up… *it wore him thin.*

He didn't expect Cope to be there, leaning against a floodlight, sleeves pushed up, hair damp like he'd just rinsed the dust off.
Cope straightened when he saw him. 'Hey. You got a minute?'

Liam's chest tightened. 'Yeah. Sure.'

Cope studied him. 'How's the shoulder?'

Liam forced a shrug. 'Still attached.'

'You keeping busy?'

'I try.'

'Like by glowering at people from across the chow tent?'

Liam looked away, heat creeping up the back of his neck. 'Don't start.'

'I'm not starting,' Cope said gently - Liam didn't have to look to know those soft, earnest eyes were on him. 'I'm asking.'

Silence stretched between them - hot, brittle, stupidly loud. Liam could hear his own pulse more than the noise of the camp.

Cope tried again. 'Are you mad at me?'

'I'm not.' *Too fast. Too stern. Too Drill Instructor Sullivan.*

Cope frowned. 'Then what?'

Liam exhaled through his teeth. 'You've been… around. With those guys.'

'You mean the SEALs?' Cope didn't need confirmation. His expression shifted into understanding - the calm, patient kind that made Liam want to hit something. 'Some of them are actually good company,' Cope said.

'I didn't say they weren't.'

Cope's voice stayed low. 'You looked like you wanted to punch every one of them.'

Liam's stomach twisted. 'It's not -' But the words jammed because he honestly didn't know what to say, what explanation he could give...

Cope stepped closer - not enough to touch, but enough that Liam felt the change in the air between them. 'I know you said we could be friends, but I can't. Not yet.'

'That's okay,' Liam said, even though it tasted wrong the second it left his mouth.

Cope's eyes swept over his face, searching. 'It's clearly not.'

'I told you. I'm fine.' His heart thudded against his ribs, but his voice stayed steady - he was a Marine - a damned good one - he could keep his cool.

'Right,' Cope murmured, looking down as he worried at his lip.

Liam swallowed hard. Words crowded his throat - messy, dangerous, far too honest. He forced them back.

Footsteps crunched over the gravel. 'Hey, Cam!' The medic - using

Cope's first name, like it was natural. He noticed Liam and saluted.

Liam returned it, half-hearted.

'Sorry to interrupt,' the medic said lightly. He nodded at Liam - polite, but not intimidated - then held out a small, dog-eared paperback.

'Here. The book I told you about. You'll love it.'

Cope brightened—just enough for Liam to feel it ache faintly like a bruise. 'Thanks.'

'No problem.' The medic smiled, brief but warm. Their fingers brushed when Cope took the book.

Liam's jaw flexed. The twist in his gut wasn't just irritation—*something sharper, rawer.* He wasn't ready to name it, but he knew it was *jealousy*. *And that scared the hell out of him.*

The medic looked between them
- *reading the tension instantly* - then gave Cope a small, private nod before heading off.
Cope watched him go for a second too long.

When he finally turned back, Liam's expression had already iced over. He cleared his throat, aiming for normal. 'I'll let you get to it,' he said, nodding at the book.

'It's a book - it can wait if you want to -,'

'I have to get my stitches checked,' Liam cut in, even though he wasn't due for another hour. 'See you around, Cope.'

Cope deflated, looking at him with those wounded, dog-like eyes, as his lips pressed into a thin line, his fingers tapping on the book absentmindedly as he studied Liam for a second too long. 'See you around… *Sarge*.' He said finally and it sounded like a sigh.

Liam made it exactly twelve steps before the moment replayed itself for the third time.
He told himself it wasn't a big deal.
He told himself he didn't care.
He told himself the medic handing Cope a dog-eared paperback meant nothing.

Cope calling him *Sarge* meant nothing.
He wanted them to be friends. He had friends who called him Sarge. It was good. It was healthy. It was safe.
And yet.

He reached the shade of a tent, rested his good shoulder against the canvas wall, and closed his eyes. He could still see it - that tiny shift in Cope's face, the one Liam always caught before anyone else. The way he'd lit up over a damn book.

Liam inhaled hard. Get over it.
But Rob's voice pushed through the static: "*You don't like being replaced."*
He hated how true it felt.

Finally he pushed off the tent wall and muttered, '*Get over it,'* under his breath.
If he said it enough times, maybe he'd manage it.
But the twist in his gut didn't ease.
And the image of Cope smiling - soft, unguarded, directed at someone else - stayed where it lodged: under Liam's ribs, pulsing like a bruise.

Chapter End Notes

'Get over it' is the new 'kill'

And as requested: I'm letting Sullivan marinate.

Plus the book? Totally "Interview with the Vampire"

Chapter 12: Chapter twelve

Chapter Notes

I'm back sooner than I'd expected.
Had tons of fun - my partner had a little too much fun and is regretting his choices, which meant I had my evening off!

Plus my partner's army buddies are hilarious and were a great source of inspiration, so I had a little fun with this chapter. They were all big fans of the show by the way.

Hope you enjoy!

The rec tent smelled like sweat, dust, and the faint citrus of industrial cleaner. The dry afternoon heat dragged over the base. Most guys did PT in the early mornings or in the evening - when it was still hot, but not quite as punishing.

But Sebastian had asked Cam to hang out with that lazy grin of his - the toothy kind that showcased the tiny gap between his teeth and made people follow him without thinking too hard about why. And that was how Cam wound up standing in the half-shade of the weight rack, spotting Sebastian in the world's most distracted and ineffective way, while mostly trying to ignore the way Sebastian's shoulders flexed under the strain of the bar.

"Focus," his inner voice said, unimpressed. "Or he's gonna die and it'll be your fault."

Okay, right. He had to think of something else - anything else really, so he grabbed the first topic his brain supplied. 'Thanks again for the book,' he blurted. 'It's… strange. But in a can't-stop-reading kind of way.'

Sebastian hummed. 'Lot of reading between the lines, right?'

'So they *are*...?'

Another hum, biceps working, tan skin sheened with sweat. 'Subtext. But yeah. Had an ex-girlfriend who insisted Lestat was straight.' A huff. 'Pretty sure she also thought the earth was flat.'

Cam's brain short-circuited: *Girlfriend*. He'd said *girlfriend* - casually, calmly, no grin, no wink - just girlfriend. 'Girlfriend?' He blurted arms

dropping to his sides. 'Like girlfriend girlfriend?' He really was useless at spotting and fully aware of it.

Sebastian huffed a laugh. 'Grab it,' he grunted.

Cam jolted, grabbed the bar, and racked the weight.

Sebastian sat up, towel in hand, panting slightly.
'Ever heard you're not supposed to make someone laugh while they're benching?' he teased.

Cam smiled sheepishly.

'But yeah,' Sebastian continued, wiping sweat from his forehead. 'I have girlfriends. *I'm like Bowie - I like both,*' he explained, before raising an eyebrow. 'Besides, didn't you sleep with a girl?' he added, raising a brow.

Cam made a face. 'Slovacek said I couldn't knock it untill I tried it… so I tried it. It was… okay.'

'*Okay*?' Sebastian barked, amused. 'Getting laid was just *okay*?'

Cam winced. 'She was nice. It felt nice. But…,' He bit his lip. 'Girls are… *squishy*.'

Sebastian gave him a wicked grin. 'So that's why you joined the Marines, huh? You like 'em buff.'

Cam flushed. 'We are not having this conversation here.'

'But somewhere else is fine?' Sebastian shot back, smirking as he swung a leg over the bench and stood. He stretched, long and loose and annoyingly pretty.

Cam gnawed his lip. 'So, can I ask you something?'

'Shoot.'

'If you like both… why not just do girls? Wouldn't that be...easier?'

Sebastian shrugged. 'I like both. Why limit myself? If I can have ice cream and cookies, I'm having both.'

Cam snorted. 'Maybe because the US military banned...*cookies*?'

'I'm not going on a diet because some miserable fucks are.' He grinned.

'Plus I used to be a fat kid. I am fantastic at smuggling cookies.'

Cam stared at him. 'I do not believe *you* were ever fat.'

'I'm Colombian, Cope. Frying stuff is basically my mom's love language.' He wiped down the bench before grabbing his water bottle. 'Refill?'

Cam shook his head. 'Got plenty left.'

'I'll be right back.' Sebastian walked off - and God, those shorts made Cam's brain short-circuit.

"Look at him," his inner voice sighed dreamily. "See how easy life is when you don't hate yourself?"

"I don't hate myself," Cam muttered.

"Duh. I meant Closet-Case Sullivan."

Cam stiffened. "He's… he means well."

Silence. His inner voice blinked slowly. "Oh my god," he said, deadpan. "You're defending him."

"I'm not—"

"You are. Adorable. Tragic, but adorable."

Cam rubbed his hands over his face. "He's not a bad guy."

"I never said bad. I said closeted. And a mess."

"Everyone's a mess."

"Yeah, but he's the type of mess they keep behind glass in the Zoo with a sign that says Do Not Tap on Exhibit."

"It's not that bad."

"He looks at you like you're a puppy he wants but can't adopt because his landlord banned joy. And you? You look at him like he's the sun."

Cam sputtered helplessly. "It's complicated."

"Everything here is complicated. But you don't have to defend someone who won't defend himself."

“He would,” Cam said softly. “If he could.”

A pause. Then, gentle: “How can you still like him so much?”

Cam’s heart stuttered. “I never said—”

“You didn’t have to.”

Footsteps approached.

'You good, man?” Sebastian asked. Cam hadn’t even heard him return.

'Yeah - sorry, I was just -,'

'Daydreaming?'

'Yeah, daydreaming. Let's go with that,' Cam smiled sheepishly.

Sebastian quirked an eyebrow but didn't comment as he rolled his shoulders, and glanced toward the open tent flap where sunlight baked the packed sand. 'Alright,' he said, stretching his arms overhead, 'before it gets any hotter—we running or what?'

Cam blinked. Right. The run. The thing he’d agreed to before getting distracted by… *everything*. 'Yeah,' he said, forcing his voice steady. 'Sure. Let’s do it.'

Sebastian bumped his shoulder as they headed out. 'Try to keep up, Marine.'

They jogged, falling into an easy rhythm.

'Personal question,' Sebastian said eventually. 'That Staff Sergeant the other day — the redhead. You two have history? Like *Me and Mrs. Jones* kind of history?' Cam tripped over his own feet and would have kissed the sand if Sebastian hadn't grabbed his arm to steady him. 'I’ll take that as a yes.'

Cam spluttered: 'Yes or well no. I mean—he was my DI.'

Sebastian hummed, never breaking his perfect form as he shot Cam a sidelong glance. 'Yeah Cam, don't know if anyone ever told you but your DI isn't supposed to eye-fuck you.'

'What? He did not - why would - look, it’s not like that. At all,' Cam protested still turning a shade of scarlet that had nothing to do with their leisurely pace.

'It’s fine if it is,' Sebastian said lightly. 'I just wanna know if I’m about to end up on some Staff Sergeant’s shit list if we hang out.'

'He’s just…protective,' Cam muttered.

Sebastian slowed, frowned. 'So he does know.'

Cam nodded. 'He knows.' Then, smaller: 'And he wants to be my friend.'

'His loss,' Sebastian said, shoulder-checking him - his arm lingering a beat too long. 'Didn’t expect you to go for such a pretty boy, though.'

'I wouldn’t call him that,' Cam warned. 'He terrified the hell out of everyone during bootcamp.' And he honestly couldn't even imagine what Sullivan would do if anyone ever called him "*pretty boy*" to his face.

Sebastian grinned. 'I’m a SEAL. I can handle pretty-boy Marines.' He winked. 'In case you were wondering.'

Cam’s breath stuttered — hopefully hidden by his panting.

“Sullivan would never wink at you. He’d die. He’d physically die.”

"Stop.”

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

'Mind if we make a quick stop at the field hospital?' Sebastian asked, nodding vaguely in the right direction. 'Switched shifts and I need to check if it’s on the roster or not.'

Cam hesitated for a second. Before smiling: 'Sure. Why not?'

By the time they slowed to a walk, Cam’s lungs were on fire and Sebastian didn’t look even remotely winded. Unfair. Cruel. Possibly illegal.

Sebastian nudged him with the back of his hand.
'Good run,' he said, and—God—his smile went soft again. Not cocky, not teasing. Just warm. Real. It hit Cam somewhere behind the ribs.

"Oh no," his inner voice whispered. "That’s the smile that ruins lives."

"Shut up," Cam thought.

"No," his inner voice said. "YOU shut up. I'm busy catastrophizing."

'I'll be right back, okay?' Sebastian said, his hand briefly brushing Cam's lower back before he disappeared into the tent, leaving Cam reeling. The gesture had been innocent, but strangely intimate as well. Too intimate, if the fluttery mess in his stomach was any indication.

Cam wiped sweat from his jaw with the back of his wrist and glanced around nervously, squinting against the sun. He was all over the place and needed to get a hold of himself.

'Sorted!' Sebastian said as he reappeared. 'How about we get our stuff and hit the showers? Luitenant Harris said I smelled rank, can you believe it? Probably still sore I beat him at -,'

Cam never heard at what exactly Sebastian beat the Luitenant, because Sullivan suddenly appeared behind him - coming out of the field hospital like some furious redheaded mirage in sunglasses and a perfectly crisp uniform, jaw clenched like God Himself had personally wronged him.

Cam's heart did a somersault.

Sebastian must have seen something in his expression and turned to look. '*Jesus*,' he said under his breath.

Sullivan stopped a few paces from them, posture rigid but trying to look casual. And failing miserably. He nodded at Sebastian first. Clipped. Too sharp. 'Petty Officer.'

Sebastian nodded back. 'Staff Sergeant,' he smiled, his tone almost amused.

Then Sullivan looked at Cam. Cam felt the weight of that look in his spine. 'Cope,' Sullivan said, his face impassive, but Cam's name came out as if it had razor wire wrapped around it.

'Staff Sergeant.' Cam swallowed. 'Sir.'

His inner voice screamed: "Oh my GOD he's dying. He's SO dying. Look at him. He's malfunctioning."

Sullivan's hand flexed once at his side — the only sign he wasn't actually carved from stone.

'You're,' Sullivan gestured vaguely. 'Training?'

'We went for a run,' Sebastian said, easy and unbothered. 'Good pace on him, Sir. You trained him well.'

Sullivan's jaw did a thing. Tiny. Sharp.

Cam felt the air shift.

'That so,' Sullivan said flatly.

'It is,' Sebastian replied.

Sullivan turned back to Cam, trying to hide something behind the neutral mask. It didn't work. God, it didn't work at all.

'You good?' Sullivan asked.

Cam nodded. 'Yeah. Just cooling down.'

Sullivan nodded back, eyes unblinking.

"He's trying," Cam's inner voice whispered, oddly gentle. "He's really trying. It's painful. But also… kinda sweet."

Then Sullivan cleared his throat. 'Well.' Raindrops in the desert would've sounded more natural. 'If you're done… I, *uh*.' He faltered. Sullivan. Faltered.

Sebastian's eyebrows climbed in slow, fascinated delight.

Cam swallowed, praying the SEAL would keep his mouth shut. 'Sir?'

'Maitra's looking for you. He's having some trouble with his satellite phone again,' Sullivan finally said. 'He was hoping you could help him out when you have a minute.'

Cam's stomach swooped. 'Now?' he asked carefully.

Sullivan hesitated, before he nodes tightly. 'Later is fine,' he forced out. 'Not urgent.'

'Showers it is,' Sebastian said lightly. 'You're probably just as rank as me.'

Sullivan looked at him. Really looked at him. It made Cam shuffle and squirm, as if it was two years ago and Cam was still a recruit Sullivan could crush beneath his boot.

'Right,' Sullivan said. 'It's fine if you shower first.'

Nothing about him said fine.

His jaw was set so tight, Cam was afraid the bone might pop out as he nodded once - too fast, too stiff - and stomped off like a boxer itching for a fight.

Sebastian let out a low whistle. 'Pretty boy is real subtle,' he said dryly. 'So are you by the way.'

Cam buried his face in his hands. 'Oh my God.'

Sebastian laughed - not mocking, just amused - and bumped Cam's arm. 'I've seen telenovelas with less drama.'

Cam groaned. 'Please don't.'

Sebastian grinned. 'No promises.'

And when they started toward the rec tent to get their stuff, Sebastian didn't say anything else.
Just stayed beside him - close but not pushing - letting Cam feel the shape of the moment without crowding it. Cam exhaled. Yeah. That was definitely a problem.

The walk felt… sticky. Not just because of sweat. But because Cam's brain had begun its favorite pastime of overthinking and by the time they actually reached the showers, he had already worked himself into a frenzy of emotions and embarrassment.

The communal showers were half-full - voices echoing across the open stalls, steam curling, water hissing and the peculiar smell of recycled water. Sebastian peeled off and took the shower head next to him as if this was the most normal thing in the world - Cam clutched his scratchy towel like a lifeline.

"Okay," his inner voice said, leering at Sebastian. "So you're going to shower. Like a human. A normal human. You've done this a thousand times, Cam. You've showered with hot guys before - you can shower next to a Navy SEAL who looks like he was carved by Michelangelo without making a fool of yourself."

"Stop," Cam thought.

"No," his inner voice said. "YOU stop. I'm prepping the mortification."

Somewhere next to him Sebastian stepped under a spray, water cascading down his shoulders, muscles doing probably absolutely criminally great things for him.

Don't look.

Cam turned on his own shower. Immediately blasted himself with water so cold his soul left his body.

Sebastian glanced over at his sharp intake of breath. 'Cold?'

'Fine,' Cam squeaked.

Sebastian chuckled. 'Yeah that's why you sound like Mickey Mouse, man.'

Cam tried to focus on shampoo. Normal. Not weird. Just shampoo.

Sebastian's voice drifted over the sound of water.
'So, Sullivan…'

Cam froze mid-lather.

"Nope," his inner voice said. "Abort mission. Dive. Roll. Evaporate."

Cam made a noncommittal noise that could have meant anything from "*Who"* to "*Please bury me alive"*.

'Is he really always that intense?' Sebastian continued casually. As if he hadn't just asked the world's most dangerous question next to a naked, sudsy Cam. Though in his defence, to anyone casually listening in, it probably sounded like a perfectly mundane conversation.

Cam blinked water from his eyes. 'He's… uh. He's...yeah. He's always like that.'

Sebastian hummed. 'Sounds fucking exhausting. Dude practically had smoke coming out of his ears.'

Cam sputtered. 'He wasn't - he doesn't -,' and he honestly didn't even know what he was trying to say.

'Dude.' Sebastian turned slightly, smiling. Soft. Too soft. 'It's okay.'

Cam's heart did a vertical leap.

He scrubbed his face aggressively, hoping the water disguised the fact

he was imploding. Every possible interpretation of "*showers*" was whirling around his brain like a tornado made of embarrassment. God knows where Sullivan's head went - he probably thought Cam was baiting him. As if Cam had that level of game: he'd needed two wingwomen in a gay club before he'd managed to pick someone up!

Cam wanted to scream.
Sebastian, of course, didn't notice. Or pretended not to and for a blissful few seconds Cam thought he'd let it go.

But then, after Cam had rinsed his hair, Sebastian suddenly said: 'I'm surprised he didn't follow us honestly.'

Cam choked on nothing.

"Oh my GOD," his inner voice whisper-shrieked, "Sebastian thinks this is banter. This is not banter. This is you dying slowly."

Cam muttered, 'Please stop talking,' mostly to himself.

Sebastian laughed - a warm, unbothered sound that echoed off the tiles. 'Alright, alright. No more teasing.' A beat. 'For now.'

Chapter 13: Chapter thirteen

Chapter Notes

A little heavier again - but we're getting somewhere :-)

And on an honest note: I have no nefarious plans for Sebastian. Just positive maybe flirty, maybe interested vibes.

Liam held it together for exactly twenty-three steps. *Twenty-three*. Eleven more than last time. *Fucking progress.*

On step twenty-four, something hot and mean surged up his spine. '*Fuck*' The sound slid out low, gravelly - the kind of sound reserved for combat or the bedroom.
He didn't storm so much as stomp, boots grinding grit into the hard-packed sand, kicking up dust that clung to the sweat at the back of his neck.

He didn't know where he was going. Just… *away*. Anywhere that wasn't behind him, where Cope stood with that damn SEAL smiling at him like he'd invented sunlight. And calling him Cam like it cost him nothing. Like it was easy. Like it didn't hit Liam low in the gut.

Get over it. Get over it. Get -

'Hey, Sarge, do you want to -'

Thompson's voice hit him like a rock to the temple. The kid didn't deserve the sound Liam threw at him: half snarl, half warning. Even as it left his mouth, shame twisted in his stomach and crawled up the back of his neck. He liked Tommy. But today, the word *Sarge* scraped his nerves like sandpaper.

He knew he was being a prick. Knew exactly how unreasonable he looked. But just like during that thrice-damned stint at Parris Island, he couldn't get his hands around his own emotions. Couldn't reroute them. Couldn't kill them. He was a stray bullet looking for something to hit.

His body took him further, past the barracks and straight to the place where Rob always was on slow afternoons - hunched at a table outside the tent, elbows out, head down, messing with gear
But today it was a satellite phone - the one he wasn't supposed to be

touching - its guts spilled open like a dissected frog.

'Jesus fuck, Bobby,' Rob looked up, blinking. 'Who the hell shot you in the ass?'

Relief hit Liam first - stupid, instinctive relief at seeing his best friend. Then dread. Because Rob could read him like a goddamn field manual. And Liam wasn't sure he had the strength to be seen right now. He opened his mouth. Closed it. Tried again. 'Nobody.'

Rob leaned back slowly, eyebrows rising. 'Huh. Could've fooled me. That big old vein of yours is about to declare independence. And don't think I didn't hear you barking at Tommy like you've got rabies.'

Liam scrubbed a hand over his face, heat prickling under his skin. Embarrassed and disgusted with himself in equal measure. 'I'm fine.'

'Pull the other one, Bobby,' Rob gestured vaguely at Liam's entire vibrating posture. 'This? This is not *fine*. What's up? Medical refuse to take out your stitches again? You got to trust the process, brother.'

'My stitches are out.'

Rob's eyebrows went up even higher. 'Okay, then who pissed you off?'

'No one.'

'Uh-huh. And I'm John fucking Wayne.'

Liam started pacing - heat radiated off him like an overheating engine. "*No bullshit,*" their deal, their rule, echoed through his mind. 'He - they -I just-,' The sentence blew apart mid-air, shrapnel in his mouth.

Rob blinked once. Twice. Then the slowest, most obnoxiously delighted smile stretched across his face. 'Oh my God. It's Cope.'

Liam froze mid-stride. His body went rigid top-to-bottom, like someone had yanked his spine straight with a command. He darted a look around camp, hunting for eavesdroppers.

Rob tilted his head. 'Everyone cleared out after you verbally assaulted Tommy. You owe that kid an apology, by the way - you moody asshole. But that means it is. It's Cope.' He slapped his thigh. 'What did he do, breathe too close to another man?'

Liam jolted upright like he was under inspection. 'It wasn't - that's not-,'

'Oh, holy shit, that is it,' Rob whispered, delighted. 'You're jealous.'

Liam could feel his lungs tightening. Heart hammering like a rifle shot against his ribs. Rob said it — "*jealous*" — and it landed point-blank, shattering something in his chest. 'I am not.'

Rob snorted. 'Buddy, please. Takes one to know one.'

'I'm not jealous.'

Rob crossed his arms. 'You walked in here looking like you wanted to fistfight a brick wall.'

Liam's ears burned. His jaw clenched so hard it ached. He muttered something vicious under his breath and kicked a crate, the wood rattling in protest.

'It's okay,' Rob said, tone gentling a fraction. 'Remember when I almost killed Lamb for staring at Tina's coinslot?'

Liam snorted. 'Yeah, you proposed five days later.'

Rob shrugged. 'Was going to happen anyway. Just covering my bases. Blond prick's almost as pretty as you. So what happened?'

'Nothing happened.'

'Ah yes. Your classic *Nothing Happened Spiral*.' Rob nodded like a sage. 'Worked great for you every other time you tried it. Cut the bullshit.'

Liam blew out a sharp breath through his nose. His pulse was still pounding from...what? The heat? The sprint over here? The sight of a SEAL touching Cope-, touching Cam. He dragged a hand over his face, feeling too hot and too cold at once. 'He was…'

Rob waited. Patient. Too patient.

'It looked like they were close,' Liam forced out. 'Him and that SEAL Medic.'

'So?'

'So?' Liam snapped. 'So fuck, I don't know! Okay, Robby?'

Rob's voice softened again. 'You're pissed because you like him. Same reason I didn't want Lamb looking at Tina. That's jealousy for you. Congratulations, man. You're human.'

Liam flinched like the words physically struck him. 'I don't.'

Rob sighed. 'We've been over this. Liking someone isn't a fucking war crime.'

Liam's gaze dropped to his boots. 'He deserves better,' he muttered, voice scraping low.

'Better than who?'

He didn't answer. He didn't have to.

Rob exhaled. 'Buddy. It's the system that's fucked up. Not you. And your parents sure as shit didn't help. But besides being repressed as fuck, there is nothing wrong with you. You're a good man.'

Liam's chest tightened like someone had looped cable around it and pulled. He hated this - hated talking, hated feeling, hated that he felt everything too much around one person. 'He was smiling,' he muttered. 'With him.'

'People smile.'

'Not like that.'

'And what's 'like that'?' Rob asked.

Liam shook his head. 'Forget it.'

Rob squinted at him. 'Do you want him to smile at you like that?'

Liam's breath hitched. Just a little. Rob caught it anyway.

'He already does, you know?' Rob went on quietly. 'You were a hardass at bootcamp, yeah. But whatever else you did? Somehow it was enough for him to forgive you for all of that other bullshit you pulled.'

Liam sank onto the crate behind him, sudden exhaustion dragging him down. His throat felt tight. His skin felt too small. Memories clawed at him - every snapped word, every slur he'd spit to cover softness, every moment of hope on Cope's face that Liam had personally crushed under his heel. 'God, I fucking hate this.'

'Nobody likes being jealous, Bobby. It sucks. But that's your brain telling you to get over yourself and do something.'

'It’s making me stupid.'

'You were always stupid,' Rob said. 'This just makes you obvious.'

Liam choked on a humorless laugh. 'I wasn’t obvious.'

'You always fucking are around him.'

Liam swallowed thickly, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it with fingers that shook only a little. 'It wasn’t just talking,' he admitted on the first exhale of smoke.

Rob perked up. 'Oh?'

'The little fucker is trying to get a rise out of me,' Liam muttered. 'The shit he says...*how I trained him well.* Fucking nerve-,'

'Cope?'

'No, the fucking *frog*. Dragged him to the *showers*...the little prick knows, Rob. And he’s rubbing it in my face that -,' He cut off, fist thumping the crate. He felt like a man trying to disarm a bomb wired into his own ribcage.

Rob wheezed out a laugh. 'Yeah, that’d do it. But Liam, you do realize the showers are communal right? I highly doubt anyone's having sex in there. Let alone Cope - he doesn’t strike me as the exhibitionist type.'

Liam took a deep drag of his cigarette, breathing in until his lungs hurt. 'It wasn't just that.'

'Then what?' Rob prodded gently.

'He looked happy, alright?' Liam rasped. 'He looked fucking happy. And it scared the shit out of me.' And there it was. The thing he hadn’t meant to say. The thing that once said, couldn’t be unsaid.

He sat there breathing too fast, every muscle tight, like he’d just realized something enormous and irreversible about his own heart.

Rob’s voice softened to something brotherly. 'You don’t have to do anything right now. Just… don’t shut him out. Not again. You can’t do that anymore, Bobby.'

Liam sagged, nodding once. 'Yeah.'

Rob slammed his hands on the table. 'Good. Now help me put this phone back together so Cope can fix it and you can go apologize for whatever tantrum you threw.'

Liam stared at the mess of wires. 'Rob, you're a Marine, not RadioShack. What the hell possessed you?'

'I was bored and I miss my wife.'

'You've got no patience.'

'Good thing we know a guy.'

Liam huffed something almost like a laugh.

Rob grinned. 'Exactly. And you're distracting me from loneliness. Teamwork.'

And for the first time since seeing Cope smile at another man, the vise around Liam's chest loosened. Not much. But enough. For now.

It was easier to breath after that.

Sitting next to Rob, the two of them smoking while pretending they understood even half of whatever guts Rob had dragged out of the satellite phone. Liam knew engines — could tear down a car and rebuild it the same way he cleaned and reassembled his rifle.
But phones? All those tiny wires and weird metal plates? Not a damn clue.

Still, it kept their hands busy. And apparently, that was what they both needed.
They drifted between talking about nothing and everything - the way they always did - when Liam caught footsteps coming toward them. Light, quick, a little hesitant… and unmistakably Cope.

His stomach dropped like a misfired flare.

Rob, the bastard, perked up instantly. 'Thank fuck, Cope!'

Liam almost choked on his cigarette.

Cam slowed to a stop in front of them, the tips of his ears pink, one hand hovering uncertainly near his pocket while the other clutched a toolbox a little too tight. He looked at the dismantled phone, then he glanced at Liam - just a glance, and Liam felt that avoidance like a bruise being pressed.

'Uh,' Cam said, 'I heard you were having some trouble with your phone...but this - this doesn't even look like a phone anymore.'

Rob grinned. 'Thought we'd clean it out for you - speed up the process, you know?'

Cam chuckled. 'Right: cleaning - is that what we're calling sabotage nowadays?'

Rob nudged Liam under the table. Do something.
Liam ignored him - or at least tried to. But when Cam knelt beside the table, head ducked, lashes low as he gently inspected the wires, guilt jabbed him hard under the ribs.
Hell. He owed him. And Rob wasn't wrong: he couldn't keep shutting Cam out. Not after… everything.

Liam cleared his throat. 'Cope.'

Cam froze for half a second, shoulders going rigid. '*Sarge*.'

That formality sliced right through him. Liam exhaled, rough. 'Earlier and - before that too - I shouldn't have snapped at you.'

Cam blinked at the phone's exposed inside as if it had personally offended him. 'It's fine.'

'No,' Liam said, too sharp. Then softer, a scrape of gravel. 'It wasn't.'

Cam looked up. Really looked. Wide-eyed and startled. Like Liam had just spoken in a foreign language. Beside them, Rob went very still - the kind of stillness that felt like a finally.

Liam felt his pulse in his throat. Christ, this was harder than facing enemy fire. 'I've been acting out of line,' he managed. 'You don't deserve that.'

Cam swallowed. 'Okay.' He gnawed his. 'Thank you, Sarge.'

Liam winced. *Sarge* felt wrong on him. Too stiff. Too distant. It scraped at something inside him he'd only just started to acknowledge.

'You don't need the Sarge,' Liam said gruffly. 'Sully is fine - or Liam...we're not in the field.'

'Oh,' Cam murmured. 'Okay. *Liam*.'

The sound of his name in Cam's mouth made something tighten behind Liam's ribs: something he didn't want to name, couldn't name. *Not yet.*

Cam leaned over the phone again, pink-cheeked now, the kind of flustered that made Liam's mouth dry, his hands working quickly, confidently - Liam watched too long, and knew he shouldn't.

Rob noticed. Of course he did. Liam almost stabbed him with a screwdriver for the look he gave him.

'Why on earth did you take it apart completely?' Cam said after a moment, absently twisting a cable back into place. 'Nothing looks fried — it was probably just some sand giving you trouble.'

'I was bored,' Rob admitted. 'And impatient. Figured I'd just take a stab at it and see where it took me.'

'Well, it took you to a very complicated jigsaw puzzle,' Cam deadpanned, making a face

'I'm sure you're up to the challenge, Cope,' Rob said, squeezing Cam's shoulder.

'I don't… I mean, this? This might take me a while,'

'Great,' Rob said simply. 'It'll give us some time to catch up. Here,' he added, getting up, 'take my seat. Liam will be your assistant, and I'll get us something to drink.'

Cam blinked, still unaccustomed to the force of nature that was Rob Maitra. 'I can take it back to Comms,' he said nervously, glancing at Liam almost apologetically. 'You don't have to -,'

'Stop it,' Rob said. 'You're good company, Cope. We like having you here. Right?'

'Right,' Liam said quietly, surprising himself.

Cam's head snapped up: soft and startled in a way he couldn't hide. Liam looked away.

'So now that's settled,' Rob said smugly. 'You're staying, right?'

Cam straightened, wiping his hands on his trousers, awkward again but lighter than when he'd arrived. 'Okay.'

'Great,' Rob said shooting Liam a pointed look. 'I'll be right back.'

beside Liam far more carefully than needed, wordlessly sorting the parts into neat little piles: methodical and painfully quiet.

Be normal, Liam ordered himself. People do this. People talk. It's not a combat op.

'It's, uh…' Liam cleared his throat. 'It's okay if you can't fix it. Rob has a reputation for being hard-handed with delicate equipment.'

Cam chuckled, shaking his head. 'This isn't broken — this is a dissection. I'm pretty sure I can Frankenstein it back to life. But it might take a while.'

'Thanks,' Liam said, leaning back to watch him work.

Cam shrugged, tucking a stray screwdriver into his waistband, finger snagging behind his belt. Liam's gaze tracked the motion before he could stop. He dragged his eyes away, pulse jumping.
Cam didn't notice — too focused. But Liam felt it. Hot and unmistakable: *the want.*

'So…' Cam said after a while, his voice shy. 'About earlier-,'

'It was none of my business,' Liam said, even though the words scraped him raw. 'I was being an asshole.'

Cam squirmed, eyes on the table and his posture wound so tight Liam thought he might snap in half. 'There's uhm,' he cleared his throat awkwardly. 'There's nothing going on between me and Sebastian. We're...friends? I think?'

Relief clawed at Liam first; sharp, almost dizzying. Friends. He wanted to say something - anything that: a denial? A declaration? He wasn't sure - but his brain short-circuited, and all he managed was; '*Good*.'

A second of silence settled: not tense, but warm. Cam smiled at him, soft and crooked. It hit Liam square in the chest. Not like a blow, but like a landing.

'You seem...less tense than before,' Cam said.

'I'm trying,' Liam muttered. 'Rob... talked at me.'

Cam laughed: bright and real. Liam wanted to bottle it.

'What about?' Cam asked, before making a face. 'Sorry - none of my business, I didn't mean-,'

'About you.'

Cam went still, eyes shining up at Liam. '*Oh.*'

Liam nodded, out of words, and painfully aware of his arm brushing Cam's every time he reached for a part: warm, real, leaving a hum under his skin. It had been two and a half years since he'd touched someone in a way more than friendly.
And he'd never been more aware of it than he was now

He almost sagged in relief when Rob reappeared, tossing a water bottle at Liam's head - one he barely caught - and handing Cam his.

'How's the patient, doc?'

'Looking promising,' Cam said, glancing at Liam with just a hint of a smile.

They spent two hours together. The three of them talking while Cam worked. And somehow, between the careful twists of cables and the quiet hum of conversation, Cam slid effortlessly into Liam and Rob's orbit, like he'd always belonged there. Liam felt it in his chest — the slow unclenching of something that had been coiled tight for far too long. He laughed more than he had in months, leaned into the casual rhythm of their banter, and for the first time in a long time, felt a little less like the world was ready to punish him for feeling too much.

And yet later: when the base finally quieted and it was just the desert wind sighing through camp, the sound of distant boots crunching gravel and snoring everywhere - Liam couldn't sleep.

He lay on his bunk, staring at the canvas ceiling, and threw an arm over his eyes, but he could still see Cam's smile: soft, crooked, half-shy.

He rolled onto his side. The cot creaked. His dog tags slid across his chest, cold against the overheated skin. He pressed a hand there, over his tattoo, like he could steady something inside.

It had been hours since Rob had cornered him, dragging truth out of him like a medic digging out shrapnel. *Jealous*. The word still felt radioactive. He didn't like being jealous. Didn't like being anything. Emotions were messy. They made him weak.

'Fuck,' he whispered into his pillow. He rubbed his face hard. He liked Cam. *Not mentor-to-junior.*
Not protectiveness. Not friendship. Different.
It was the feeling when Cam said his name like it mattered. The twist in his chest when Cam smiled at someone else. The burn of seeing another man's hand on him...
It scared the hell out of him.

He shut his eyes again and he remembered the kid at bootcamp: all sharp bones and nerves and stubborn loyalty. Remembered the day on the Stairway to Heaven when Cam looked at him like he hung the damn moon - and how Liam had stomped that look out. Remembered how he'd left him in that swamp with just a radio and another fucked up experience to lug around in his pack.
Liam had been cruel. Liam had been a coward. And yet now, two years later, Cam still smiled at him. Still forgave him. Still looked at him like he wanted something Liam wasn't sure he had the right to give.

He felt like he was standing on the edge of a long drop, and the only thing ahead of him was the truth he'd run from for years: He liked Cameron Cope.

Fuck.

Chapter 14: Chapter fourteen

Chapter Notes

I've said this before. But we're getting somewhere. For real.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fixing Sergeant Maitra's phone had taken longer than Cam expected - *a lot longer*. Maitra handled technology the way a bull handled fine china: no care, no hesitation, and no survivors. Honestly, Cam would salute the man's blatant disregard for government property… if he hadn't been the idiot trained to fix it.

But despite the work, the afternoon had pleasantly melted into evening without Cam ever noticing. He'd had… fun.

"Well, eventually you had fun," his inner-self drawled. "Let's not pretend the first hour wasn't emotional trench warfare because Sullivan finally used his words to express an emotion you like," his inner-self said. "Or wait, scratch that—he didn't express an emotion, he expressed a maybe-emotion."

"Stop."

"You're basically happy because he gave you a box in it with a cat that may or may not be dead."

"Look, I know. He apologised. That's it. And he wants to be friends. I got the memo. And it's… okay. I like being around him. It's nice. And besides: he's trying. That's really big for him."

His inner-self blinked once. Twice. Hands on hips. "Friends? Friends, Cam? Wow. Maybe Mrs. Tillman was right in third grade. Maybe you are just as stupid as Benji. But sure - let's keep pretending his soul doesn't leave his body every time Sebastian touches you."

"He's protective."

"He's jealous, you airhead. And you're in denial because he's hurt you more often than a six-year-old hurts its knees."

"You were the one who said-,"

"That Sullivan is a bad idea? Yup." He popped the p. "The man is a mess

Maitra is trying to tape together with duct tape. Would Sebastian be easier? Definitely. Less complicated, less jaded—he'd be fun. Gorgeous. Hot. Fun." He shuddered dramatically. "And Sullivan...he's Sullivan… but now, he's also Liam apparently."

Cam bit his lip. Nodded. "Liam. I told you he's trying."

"He's trying," his other side conceded. "And you'd probably have fun with him too. You can't look like that and not know how to have at least a little fun. But things will never be easy with him. There will always be duct tape, superglue, and confusion holding everything together. Lots and lots of confusion."

"He told me he didn't—"

"Oh my god, Cameron, he's not trying out of the goodness of his heart. Aim a little more south."

"He was just being nice."

"Exactly! And since when is that man known for being nice?" He threw his hands up. "He's not nice! Not verbally, not intentionally, and definitely not often!"

At first glance, that was true. Sullivan was cold stone; nothing soft about him. He walked like a fighter - arms wide, eyes sharp, jaw set - telegraphing to anyone with a pulse that he wasn't someone to mess with. But once you got used to reading between the lines, you learned what it looked like when *Liam* bled through the harshest edges. You learned to listen for accidental truths hidden between grunts and static. And today, it felt like the lines had moved. Or blurred...

Or maybe he'd just imagined it all like an idiot. He scrubbed a hand over his face and kept walking. *"He didn't mean it like that. He was just being nice."*

The answering snort from his inner voice let him know exactly how much credit that theory deserved.

It was edging close to his normal dinner time when he finally made it back to his barracks, and Ray was outside waiting for him. Sitting in a folding chair, long legs stretched out, cap tilted down to watch the world pass in slow motion.

His palm was healing slowly - it was awkward place for a burn - and Ray was a terrible patient. Light duty didn't agree with him;

paperwork and inventory checks weren't drills, aid drops, or watch. Ray was bored, restless… wound tight, and he was absolutely going to see right through him.

'Hi, man!' Ray's scowl brightened immediately as Cam sat, squinting into the hot, setting sun while a warm wind rustled loose sand across their boots.

'Long day?' Cam asked.

Ray sighed. 'I just feel like I'm wasting my time, you know?'

Ray had never hidden his ambition to climb the ranks and the deadlines he'd set himself. He'd gotten better about giving himself grace, but this injury was obviously pushing him back toward breaking point.

'You need to give yourself a break. Not even you can will away a wound,' Cam said, then added with a grin, 'Besides, you were heroically wounded defending base camp. That had to be on one of your checklists, right?'

Ray's crooked grin said everything. He nudged Cam's ankle with his boot. 'Wood said you were out on repairs. Anything good?'

Cam snorted. 'Staff Sergeant Maitra had a glitchy phone. Easy fix, right? Would've been if he hadn't dismantled the thing like a Thanksgiving turkey because he was - and I quote - *bored*.'

Ray laughed, shaking his head. 'You wonder how that guy is friends with someone like Sullivan.'

'I don't think you can get rid of Maitra once he's picked you. I think he just latches on... like a *barnacle*," Cam said, earning a chuckle. 'Besides - Sullivan's different around Maitra. He jokes around - and he was even singing along to the radio. Singing, Ray! And he's good at it. Like… really good.'

Something flickered across Ray's face. 'Of course Sullivan was there. I knew you were too giddy.' He sighed. 'Jesus, Cam - I thought you were going to back off Sullivan?'

It wasn't an accusation. But it wasn't gentle, either. Just Ray, soft steel.

'I did - I mean I am - I was just fixing the phone. 'Cam scrubbed a hand

through his hair. 'He just happened to be there too.'

Ray looked unimpressed. Deeply unimpressed. 'Cam,' he said finally, voice flat with rehearsed patience, 'we've been through this. He's already made you miserable enough. The way you keep running back to him… Cam, that's just plain masochistic.'

'He apologised!' Cam blurted, hands clasped between his knees like a schoolboy in the principal's office. 'He even said he'd been an asshole!'

'Of course he called himself an asshole, Cam. He *is* an asshole.' Ray leaned forward, eyes intent. 'And you don't forgive someone for trying to break your spirit just because he has one moment of self-awareness.'

'Maitra talked to him,' Cam said defensively. 'Or—*at* him. He's trying, Ray. Really trying. And I don't see why I can't let him try. Why we can't be friends. You can't keep holding bootcamp against him - he was confused and hurting and-,'

'—taking it out on you.'

Cam shot him a look. 'He was helping me. Or he thought he was.'

'The fact he genuinely thought that doesn't inspire hope,' Ray muttered, pulling off his cap to rake a hand through his black hair. 'This is terrible for my stress levels.'

Cam softened. Because under everything Ray had said, all Cam heard was the worry. The warning. The *you don't deserve to get hurt like that again*. Ray had good instincts; he'd always had good instincts. But Ray wasn't in Cam's head. Ray hadn't seen Sullivan - *Liam* - with his guard down, eyes soft around the edges like he didn't know how to hold his own intensity. 'I've told you, you don't need to worry about me.'

Ray scoffed. 'You're the closest friend I have, Cam. And I dragged you into all of this. So no - do not expect me not to worry. Especially about a guy who behaved like a field shower around you: freezing one second, burning hot the next - completely *obsessed*.'

Cam flushed. 'To be fair, it's Sullivan. His burning hot was like… tepid at best.'

Ray shot him a look. 'Do I need to remind you NCIS thought he was screwing you during bootcamp? They wouldn't have asked that if people hadn't noticed some things.'

Cam cringed. He always did. There were few things more humiliating than that interview - even for someone who'd grown up as Barbara Cope's son and had his head shoved in a toilet.

'I know you're looking out for me. And I appreciate it, I really do. But trust me on this? Sullivan… he was different today. It's like he finally really looked at me. And I don't know what to do with that, but - Sullivan is trying to be my friend. And… that's okay. And if I get hurt, I get hurt. I've been hurt before. I'll be hurt again.'

Ray sighed - a long-suffering sigh - as he stared at Cam like he wished he could wrap him in bubble wrap. 'Why do you always get a crush on the least convenient people?'

Cam choked on air. Violently.

Ray slapped him on the back. 'Jesus, Cam, no need to die.'

Cam wheezed, face red, eyes watering.

'I trust you,' Ray said. 'I trust your judgement. I just don't trust *his*. So promise me you're not going to jump into anything until you're ready and he's figured out whatever the hell he's doing.'

'Friends - just friends,' Cam managed between gasping breaths. 'He doesn't - he doesn't feel like that.'

Ray grabbed the back of Cam's neck and shook him like an unruly puppy. 'If he hurts you again, I'm convincing Slovacek to break his nose.'

Cam didn't sleep much that night. Maybe forty minutes. An hour, if he was generous. Every time he'd drifted towards sleep, memories of the day had flickered behind his eyes like faulty film - and Cam had spent the night staring at the dark green canvas ceiling replaying everything on a cursed mental loop.

By sunrise he was hollowed out, jittery on bad coffee and nerves. And when the orders came to prep for an incoming sandstorm - Cam didn't even have the energy to groan. Command wanted everyone moved into the airport building for the next forty-eight hours. Tents were useless in high winds, and no one wanted sand in weapons or vital organs.

The entire base was buzzing with activity: boots, shouts, canvas snapping in the wind. Cam was relieved they were taking it seriously;

he'd been in a sandstorm once before, it had turned the sky to rust and the air to wet concrete. Mogadishu storms weren't supposed to be that bad, but drought and civil-war damage had given Mother Nature some extra teeth.

Wood had assigned him to satellite duty around the airstrip - which meant building plywood shields and covering units with reinforced tarp. It was sweaty, gritty work, but familiar: tarp, straps, clamp, anchor. Over and over. Safe work - at least mentally.

The wind was coming in sharp, dry pushes now, making the tents ripple like they were trying to lift off. Everything was turning a sickly yellow-brown that screamed you're running out of time. They'd been forced to split up: too little time and not enough men - it made the work hard. Cam sat back on his heels and wiped his forehead. He felt wan. He'd skipped breakfast. And lunch. And now his stomach was rebelling against the coffee he'd inhaled like oxygen as he held down a stubborn sheet of tarp.

'Cope? That you?'

Cam nearly dropped the tarp. Liam's voice cut through wind and worry, right to the core of him.

He looked over his shoulder, heart doing a traitorous little skip: Liam looked as dusty-eyed and underslept as Cam felt - but steadier. Always steadier. Like not even a storm could knock him down.

'You should head back - wind's picking up!' Cam said, louder than intended. People underestimated how fast the world went from clear to choking.

'Same goes for you,' Liam replied, hands shoved into his pockets like the weather wasn't chewing the base apart, his hair wind ruffled out of regulation. 'Wood said to get your ass back. You good?' His eyes flicked to Cam's half-built shield.

'I'm fine,' Cam muttered, tightening a strap with more force than sense.

'Yeah,' Liam said calmly, 'that's why your hands are shaking.'

Cam froze. Shit. They were. 'I didn't sleep much,' he said defensively.

Liam's expression softened in that frustrating, terrifying way it did; like someone skimmed warm fingers against Cam's ribs without

touching him. 'Storm'll be here soon,' he said. 'Let me help.'

'You don't know how to-'

'Cam.' Soft. Steady. Patient as he dropped to his knees beside Cam. 'Just show me.'

Cam swallowed the lump in his throat and passed him a strap. Liam fumbled it once, swore under his breath, shot Cam a look half irritation, half embarrassed - *and God, it made Cam's stomach flip.*

They worked fast. And for a second there was an ease between them: the kind that made Cam feel safe and stupid and warm in ways he probably shouldn't feel. But then the wind picked up, and a warning gust slapped the tarp out of Cam's hand. Liam caught the edge before it sailed off.

The horizon had already turned the colour of old brick. And Cam's stomach twisted anxiously. 'Storm's rolling in,' he muttered.

Liam nodded. 'Yeah. We should -,'

The wind hit again. Hard. A wall of gritty heat that made them both duck. Cam squinted through it, dragging the final cover down, Liam bracing the frame.

'Okay - okay, that's it, let's go!' Cam shouted.

Liam didn't move immediately. He leaned in, close enough that Cam felt his breath hot against his neck. 'You good?'

Cam's pulse stuttered. 'I'm fine.'

Liam nodded. 'Airport. Now,' he ordered, grabbing Cam's sleeve and hauling him upright with zero effort.

Their arms brushed as they moved - small, accidental touches that lit Cam up in ways that he didn't want to examine too closely.

Halfway to the building, everything picked up and sand hit Cam's face like needles. He grabbed Liam's elbow just to keep his bearings - only to feel Liam wobble too. 'Fuck,' Cam spluttered, wiping at his eyes: if *Liam Sullivan* was wobbling, then Cam was allowed to struggle without shame.

Liam grabbed his wrist: a firm, grounding squeeze. Stay with me. It shouldn't have meant anything...but Cam's pulse did not agree.

The storm gnawed at every inch of exposed skin, but Liam kept Cam behind him, using his broad frame to shield him a little as they pushed through the wind until the airport building loomed out of the haze. Liam shoved the side door open and practically dragged Cam inside, slamming the door behind them. The airport was loud and chaotic - but all Cam heard was his own heartbeat, loud and disobedient.

They were covered in sand: hair, lashes, uniforms - and standing too close in the dim corridor. Liam's hand was still around Cam's wrist. And Cam didn't want to be the one to pull away.

Liam released him slowly and coughed once. Twice. Thrice. 'You okay?' He asked even hoarser than normal.

'Yeah,' Cam croaked. 'Thanks. For…you know - not letting me get sand-skinned alive.'

Liam nodded, jaw tight. Something flickered across his face: dangerous, unreadable - and Cam's stomach flipped.

Footsteps clomped toward them. Sergeant Major Wood halted when he saw them.

'Fuck.' He squinted. 'You two look like somebody rolled you in breading.' He exhaled. 'But thank fuck you're back.'

Cam quirked a smile at Wood, who'd been quite obviously loitering by the door like a nervous hen.

'Got caught in the storm,' Liam said.

'Fucking desert climate,' Wood muttered, checking them over before relief washed over his face. 'Thanks for getting him, Sullivan. I owe you one.' His hand landed heavy and warm on Cam's shoulder. 'You did good, Cope.'

Cam ducked his head. 'Couldn't have done it without Staff Sergeant Sullivan's help.'

'Take the compliment, Cope.' Wood said, with a fond twist of his mouth. 'Now how about you two hit the showers before you track sand everywhere, huh?'

Cam's brain short-circuited.

Showers.

With Sullivan.

Well obviously not with Sullivan but near Sullivan.

Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

Liam bumped Cam's shoulder lightly as they walked past Wood - an absent, friendly gesture that sent Cam spiraling straight into a freefall: Liam had come for him. Liam had grabbed him. Liam had shielded him. Liam had looked at him like he mattered. And now they were going to shower. God.

Cam tripped over a warped tile. Liam caught his elbow. 'Easy,' he murmured.

Cam forgot how lungs worked.

The changing room was way too small. Not physically — it was the standard tile box with a drain in the middle and cheap metal benches bolted to the floor. But the moment Cam stepped inside, sand still stuck to his eyelashes, it felt like the walls had moved in several feet. *An emotional shoebox - a death trap*. The showers were in the room next to it, Cam could hear running water and voices, they weren't alone and he honestly didn't know right now if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

"Calm down. You've been in a room with naked men before. You survived basic training. You showered with Sebastian without inconvenient wood. Hell - you've slept in the same bad as Slovacek. You'll be fine."

"I might not get hard," Cam muttered to himself. "But I'm definitely not fine."

He kept his back turned and focused on peeling off his sand-crusted blouse. It stuck to his collarbone, gritty and uncomfortable.

Behind him, Liam muttered, 'Fuck. It's everywhere.'

Cam risked a sliver of a glance.

Liam ruffled his hair, sending a soft cascade of sand to the floor.

"Don't look. Don't look. Don't -,"

"You should look," his inner-self purred. "Just to check your buddy for injuries. Very responsible."

Cam's mind went static.

'Cope - you good?' Liam asked behind him, voice warm and rough.

'Yep!' Cam squeaked: voice too high, too shrill for normal. 'Great. Totally great. Can't see. But great.'

Liam paused. Then came the quiet rustle of a belt.

Cam's pulse hit escape velocity.

"Deep breaths. You are in a confined space with a man you're stupidly in love with. Who came looking for you in a sandstorm. He is your friend. You do not objectify friends."

"Oh for crying out loud," his bratty inner-self snapped. "He literally shielded you with his body. Objectify away, you idiot!"

Cam tugged too hard on a boot and nearly fell backward. Liam's hand landed on his arm, steady and warm. Cam went perfectly still.

Liam froze too; realizing, withdrawing like he'd touched something molten. 'Watch it, Cam.'

'Thanks,' Cam whispered. *"I'm not fine. Not even close. I'm going to combust. This is how I die."*

"But what a way to go."

He sat on the bench before his knees betrayed him, pulling off his undershirt with trembling hands. Sand scraped against skin.

Behind him, Liam chuckled.

'We look like we rolled through a sandbox.'

Cam didn't dare speak. If he opened his mouth a confession, a prayer, or a horrifying noise might come out. So he nodded and—like a fool—glanced again.

Liam was stepping out of his pants, dusting sand off his shoulders, looking utterly unbothered by his own half-nakedness, let alone Cam's.

"Of course he doesn't care. Who gets self-conscious looking like that?"

"Please stop talking," Cam begged his inner self.

"Why are you so stressed? This is the second time in two days that we get to shower with a gorgeous man who likes dick," he kicked his feet as he sat on the bench, shamelessly leering. "I'd say things are finally looking up for us."

"Yeah well lets hope nothing else starts looking up," Cam muttered.

Chapter End Notes

Another shower - I like parallels :-)

Chapter 15: Chapter fifteen

Chapter Notes

> I'd like to apologise to my partner - who was just trying to have a nice shower when I walked into our walk-in shower and stared at him while brushing my teeth because I wanted some inspiration.
>
> Also: this is very wordy, but honestly I didn't know how else to tackle this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liam stripped fast: efficient motions, hands moving on instinct as he shook sand out of every seam. He'd done this a thousand times; ten years in the service had burned the self-consciousness - *the fear* - out of him. Showering with other men had become muscle memory, routine - *nothing*.

Except today, it wasn't nothing.
Because today, it wasn't just other men. Today, Cameron Cope was right beside him. And that turned habit into something with teeth.

Cam undressed, awkward and tentatively, turning his back as he fumbled with his blouse. None of the practiced bravado Liam remembered from Aaron - who had turned stripping down into a seduction, a goddamn performance the first time they'd shared a changing room.
Cam was the opposite: clumsy, earnest, unsure. An echo of the recruit who had somehow burrowed under Liam's skin.

And the realization that Cam was probably nervous because of him loosened something warm and unsteady in Liam's chest.

He'd seen Cam naked before. It was inevitable for a drill instructor - but he had always taken care to protect himself: eyes high, focused, disciplined. Straight. A good rule. A *safe* rule. A rule that had kept him steady long before he'd ever heard the name Cameron Cope.
But suddenly the rule felt thin. Too easy to tear through.

He forced himself through the motions of undressing, deliberate and casual.

Then he tugged off his underwear.

He felt it instantly: the eyes on him, a prickle between his shoulder blades, a soft rush of awareness raising the hair on his neck, sending a shiver up his spine despite the humid heat.

He didn't look back. Even though he wanted to - *badly*. He kept moving, crossing the short distance to the showers, only to falter when he noticed the only free shower heads faced each other.

Of fucking course they did.

Chatter echoed off the tiled walls, over a dozen other men hardly taking notice of him as they scrubbed sand off themselves. Good - *he could handle being here with Cope* - as long as they weren't *alone*.

The spray was weak but warm, smelling faintly of recycled water, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Cam walk in.

Liam exhaled into the steam.
He could turn away. He should turn away.
But Cam had looked at him. And the thought slid in before he could stop it: *Would Cam mind if I looked back?* He told himself to look anywhere else: tile, floor, the half-rusted pipe overhead. But his eyes betrayed him - *just a slip* - and
flicked forward. Water stung his eyes: he blinked it away - *once, twice* - and then he saw Cam - looking right back at him.

Liam's pulse lurched, a full-body jolt like he'd been caught somewhere he shouldn't be. His gaze snapped away, instinct winning out: old fear, old training, the reflex to hide etched into him. He tipped his face up into the shower stream, scrubbing harder than necessary, trying to reset his breathing, his heartbeat, *himself*.

He hadn't felt like this since he was eighteen, standing in a barracks shower realizing what he was. But he wasn't eighteen anymore. *And Cam had looked first.*

He swallowed. Steam filled his lungs.
After a heartbeat of reckless courage - *or stupidity* - Liam let his eyes drift back down. Not a glance. Not a check. A look. Unguarded. Direct. Seeking.

And in the quiet space between two heartbeats, all of Liam's thoughts snapped into a single clear line he couldn't block out: *Fuck, he's gorgeous.*
Not soft, not fragile - lithe, long lines of lean muscle, and part of Liam, the part he'd spent years locking down, wanted to keep looking.

Lower. Longer.

He shut his eyes, turning his face into the steadying stream, raising his hands to scrub at his hair. Water ran over his chest in a way that left him visible.

Lookable.

He felt like a *goddamn idiot,* but he wanted to offer himself up.

Wanted Cam to know it was okay to look.

That Liam wanted him to look.

He dragged his hands down his face, letting
water sheet off his skin, trying to wash the static out of his nerves. It didn't work. His pulse still thudded at the base of his throat - too aware of everything: the heat, the echoing voices, the thin tile between them - *and the fact that Cameron Cope stood directly across from him, water tracing the curve of his shoulders and the smooth muscle of his chest.*

Liam opened his eyes - and their gazes collided so suddenly it felt like a physical impact.

Cam didn't look away. Not this time. No startled flicker. No embarrassed drop of his eyes.
He'd taken the hint. Cam was looking at him from under his lashes, eyes wide, pink-cheeked, curious...*wanting.*

Liam's mouth went dry. His fingers curled against the water slipping through them. Heat flared low in Liam's gut, terrifying and intoxicating. But then instinct clawed its way back up: *Look away before you do something stupid. Before someone sees. You fucking reckless fuck*

His body didn't listen: he watched Cam swallow, slow and uncertain, his eyes flicking down - not far, not long, just enough for Liam to feel it like a brand across his skin. And then Cam dragged his gaze back up, slow, deliberate. Letting Liam see it. Letting the truth slip through.

Too much. Way too much.
He jerked his gaze upward, pretending to rinse shampoo out of his hair, acting like nothing had happened, but every part of him felt lit up, flayed open, because Cameron Cope was looking at him the same way Liam had probably been looking at him since the day they met,

and Liam didn't know whether to run from it, *or fall straight into it.*

When he finally shut the water off, he exhaled slowly. Too slowly. His pulse was still skittering, undecided between fight, flight, or whatever the hell this was.

He grabbed a towel off the stack. Rough, military-issue, smelling faintly of bleach and sand. Grounding. Good.

Cam reached for one at the same time, and their fingers brushed. Just a glancing contact - *barely* anything.

Cam froze. Liam froze harder.

Cam snatched his hand back like the towel had shocked him, and Liam forced himself into motion before it looked strange. He stepped aside, neutral, steady, like nothing had happened at all, like they weren't naked and dripping wet.

'Go ahead,' Liam said, voice normal. *Too normal.* A rehearsed normal.

'Thanks,' Cam murmured, pink-eared and flustered, clearly unsure where to look.

They dried off the way soldiers do - fast, efficient, and without modesty.

Liam kept his eyes on his towel, his boots, his uniform laid out like a lifeline. But every few seconds, Cam flicked a glance at him. Quick, skittish checks. Like he was making sure Liam was still there. Still real. Still… something.

Liam focused on breathing evenly: don't look back. Don't. Just don't.

Of course he looked back.

Cam stood near the benches, towel around his neck, rubbing a hand through his wet hair. He looked soft around the edges—worn from the sandstorm, from the night before, from whatever this thing between them was.

Something in Liam unclenched. Just one notch.
Just enough for warmth to slip through before he could lock it down. Near-softness. And it came out of him without permission: 'You okay?' he asked quietly; *too gently, too sincere* for a military locker room and the second the words left him, he knew they were wrong. *Too close.*

Too revealing.

Cam blinked, startled. 'Yeah,' he said, cheeks flushing. 'Just… tired.'

Liam nodded, though something tightened hard in his throat. He had the urge to step closer - just half a step, just enough that Cam might feel the heat of him and know - but he shut it down fast. He set his jaw and reached for his shirt, pulling it over his head with brisk precision, the fabric settling over him like a shield.

Beside him, Cam hurried to dress as well. He fumbled with a sleeve, dropped it, muttered under his breath as he scooped it back up. The small, helpless clumsiness landed like a punch to Liam's ribs. His arm actually twitched forward before he forced it still and swallowed it back down.

They left the changing room together, shoulders brushing once, then not again. The walk down the quiet service corridor toward the terminal was silent, but not the strained kind. It felt… warm. Close. Like the air between them had finally admitted something neither of them had said out loud.

Then, just before the corridor opened out into the noise and lights of the makeshift dorm, Liam's hand lifted. No thought, no permission - just motion and brushed across the small of Cam's back as they walked.

Cam inhaled sharply, stopping just enough to glance over his shoulder at him: eyes wide, startled, but not pulling away. Not angry. Not confused - but *hopeful*.

'Get some rest,' Liam said. The words came out lower, rougher than he'd meant.

Cam didn't speak. He just stared: cheeks warm, ears bright red, a smile trying and failing to stay tucked in the corner of his mouth.

Liam pulled his hand back, resisting the urge to reach again. Then he stepped past Cam before he could lose what little discipline he still had, forcing himself down the final stretch of the hall toward his cot.

He didn't look back. He couldn't.

But the weight in his chest felt… lighter. Recklessly, embarrassingly lighter.

'What's got you swinging your dick around like that?' Rob asked, sprawled on his cot, pen and paper in hand.

Liam dropped onto his own cot with a huff. 'Nothing, brother. You writing Tina?'

Rob scratched his head with the back of his pen. 'Changing the subject - something definitely happened.'

Liam chuckled, shaking his head, a smile tugging despite himself.

Rob sat up like a dog with a bone. 'Something good - because holy shit, ladies and gentlemen, he is smiling.'

'Shut up, Maitra. And give my love to your wife.'

'Do it your own damn self, Sullivan, or I won't hear the end of it,' Rob said. Then he tilted his head. 'Now are you gonna tell me what's got you surfing the room like Swayze?'

'Swayze?' Liam repeated, raising an eyebrow.

Rob gave him an unimpressed look. 'You know Tina loves Dirty Dancing. Now quit dodging the question, asshole.'

Liam flung himself back on the bed, the hum of the terminal oddly soothing as he stared at the ceiling. 'Cope,' he said simply.

Rob let out a low whistle. 'Well damn. That explains the stupid smile.'

'Shut up.'

Rob chuckled. 'Admit it. Feels good letting yourself want something.'

Liam didn't answer. He didn't need to.

Rob clapped his shoulder. 'Tina's gonna lose her mind when I tell her.'

'Don't you dare,' Liam groaned into his pillow.

Rob snorted. 'You can't stop me. I've got pen and paper. I'm unstoppable.'

And despite everything - and despite himself -
Liam smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Maybe it's the slowburn talking but - this felt porny without...you know, anything actually porny.

Chapter 16: Chapter sixteen

Chapter Notes

> Sorry, this took a day longer than I intended.
>
> I sliced my palm pretty badly doing something horribly domestic and typing is now a real pain.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cam was exhausted. But he didn't sleep.

He'd tried - *God, he'd tried* - lying under the thin military blanket, breathing deliberately, counting the flickering lights overhead like they were stars instead of badly wired fluorescents. Every few minutes he rolled onto his side, then his back, then sat up only to lie down again. Nothing worked. Because every time he closed his eyes: his brain spiralled back to the shower - and the touching.

Oh God the *touching*.

He shoved his face into his pillow, groaning into the thin fabric as mortification washed over him in a full-body wave. He shoved his face into his pillow, Ray was dead asleep on the cot beside him, blissfully unaware of Cam's psychological meltdown.

The terminal had fallen into that strange late-night quiet when everyone's either asleep or stuck on guard duty.

And Cam.
The idiot replaying three seconds of accidental intimacy and wondering if he'd hallucinated the whole thing - or maybe even worse: completely misinterpreted it?

His inner self snorted. "Misinterpret? Hello, you can't misinterpret a porno."

Cam muffled a horrified noise. "Don't say it."

"And that hand on your back, tell me what was that?"

Cam winced. "I don't know? Him being... supportive?"

His inner self gave him an affronted look. "You do remember that Liam is Sullivan, right? He doesn't touch people - nicely - unless he means to. He

wanted to touch you - you idiot, and probably for the same reason you want to touch him. And I, personally, am very here to see you finally pop that cherry."

"Stop." He pressed both hands over his burning face but the memory rose uninvited anyway: Liam in the steam, water tracking over his shoulders, his chest, the clean, carved lines of his stomach, lower, and lower— and those eyes.
Not Sullivan's bootcamp glare; he'd been terrified of Sullivan's gaze at bootcamp: cold, angry at worst, critical and assessing at best. But now, now they were *Liam's* eyes.

"He looked like he was starving," his inner self whispered. "And you were dinner."

Cam groaned, turning to lay on his back - wide awake: 'Shit,' he whispered into the dimness as an impossible heat travelled through him at the memory of Liam's hand on his back and that low, husky voice in his ear telling him to get some rest in that rough way that made Cam's knees nearly give out.

And it hit him, finally, like a slow, dawning truth:
He *wanted* Liam. He'd known that part. He'd wanted him when he was Sullivan, and he'd definitely wanted him as Liam - and now:
Liam might actually want him back.

Days ago Liam had been adamant that friendship was all that there was on the table - all Cam could have. But now the possibility of more was dangling right in front of him while he lay on a flimsy cot surrounded by a thousand sleeping Marines. Perfect conditions for an existential crisis.

Cam threw an arm over his eyes as he tried to see if he could sink into the flimsy material of the cot and dissappear.

"Nothing about that look was friendly," his inner voice murmured.

"He looked away."

"Did he really though?"

Cam bit his lip hard. He knew the rules. Knew what he was supposed to want - and not want. But want never cared about rules. And if Liam was going to look at him like that,
Cam wasn't going to look away.

'Can't sleep, Cope?' A voice whispered in the dark.

Cam nearly launched himself off the cot. He flailed—*actually* flailing—as his pulse hammered.

Rob Maitra stepped out of the dimness, camo on, rifle over his shoulder, looking like the responsible adult no one had asked for. 'Didn't mean to spook you,' he whispered. 'Saw you were awake. Wanted to check in. Heard you had a rough one today. With the sandstorm and all.'

'I'm fine.'

Rob sat down at his feet. 'You know, I've been asking that question a lot lately. And the answer is always "*fine*" and you know what? Nine times out of ten it been bullshit,' he said dryly. 'So want to cut the bullshit for me, Cope?'

Cam's fingers nervously twisted the blanket. Maitra's stare was steady and annoyingly perceptive. In daylight he was all jokes and easy smiles, but now in the dark his gaze was almost as unnervingly unblinking as Sullivan's - damn recon training.

'Did he...' Cam licked his lips, mouth suddenly dry. 'Did he say something to you?'

He wasn't going to pretend Maitra wouldn't know who he was referring to.

Maitra shrugged. 'In his Sully-coded way, yeah. But mostly I know he looks lighter but now here you are, looking about ten seconds from running into the desert.'

Cam bristled. 'I do not.'

Rob grinned, soft and easy. 'What did he do?'

'Nothing.'

Maitra gave him a look.

Cam sighed. 'He's just… confusing.'

'That tracks.'

'I don't really...understand - you know -,' Cam admitted, staring down at his own hands. '*Him*. I don't understand *him*.'

Maitra snorted. 'Sully doesn't understand Sully,' he said his voice tapering off into something soft, something tired. 'He's had a rough go of it. A hard time accepting shit for what it is. He's...look it took him *years* to tell me and I'm his brother: he killed for me - I'd die for him. But still he couldn't just...He's trying now, but this is hard for him.'

'I mean, he told me we could only be friends days ago - and now it's...different. Again.'

'Fucking ginger prick,' Rob muttered at the ceiling, appealing to a higher power for patience. 'Look. He probably said something stupid and done some really stupid shit. He usually does. And fuck it - he'll probably do and say more stupid shit along the way because that's just who he is. But I'm gonna be straight with you, Cope: you've got him on the ropes right now - he's about to fold like a house of cards - but you're going to have to make the move.'

Cam stared at him in horror. 'I don't have a move. Do I look like someone who has a move?'

"No - you really don't," his inner-self said sagely.

Maitra snorted. 'Buddy, he's been obsessed with you for two years. Whatever you're throwing out there is working.'

Cam blinked. 'Two years? Did you say—two years?'

Maitra smirked. 'You thought all those bootcamp strops were DI stuff?' He shook his head. 'Man's got a jealous streak a mile wide. Doesn't know what to do with it.'

'I...,' he trailed off, his mind drawing a blank as every memory reorganized itself with horrifying clarity.

His inner self shrugged. "Honestly? Kind of makes sense in a Silence of the Lambs way."

"Not helpful! Like - at all!"

Maitra's voice softened. 'He is an asshole, yeah. Stubborn as hell. But he's also the best man I know. And if you want him - he'll let you have him. It won't be easy. Nothing about Sully ever is. But he's worth it.'

Cam's stomach twisted—nerves, hope, two bags of Skittles—Because for the first time since he set foot in Parris Island, since the first time Liam Sullivan barked at him for standing at the wrong angle - Cam

wasn't scared of wanting him. He was scared about how badly he already did.
So he nodded. Just once.

Rob's smile spread slowly, warm and proud, and he squeezed Cam's knee. 'That's my boy.'

Cam laughed despite himself — a quiet, helpless puff of air. 'I just… I don't want to push him. He's been through things. He's guarded. And I'm...me.'

Awkward - inexperienced - an idiot. Cam chose to let Maitra fill in the blanks whichever way he wanted.

'You're kind,' Rob said simply. 'Which is why he'll let you close.'

Cam's breath snagged.

Rob watched that reaction settle, then nudged Cam's foot. 'Look, I'm not saying you need to confess undying love or whatever. Just— go check on him. Make sure he's okay. You want to. And he clearly wants you to.'

Cam stared at him. 'You really think I should go?'

'I think,' Rob said, with a smirk, 'that you're not going to sleep until you do. Might as well spare yourself the hassle.'

'I can't just show up at his cot - he'll stab me.'

'Oh he's not in his cot,' Rob said nodding his head to the left. 'He's patrolling the offices out in c-block.'

C-block. The hall of border control and customs offices they used to store more delicate equipment they didn't want out in the sand. Important enough to guard - but not somewhere anyone would need to be at night.

'How are both of you on guard?' Cam questioned.

'Technically I'm the Sergeant in charge tonight. Sully wasn't on roll. He's paying the douchbag tax for chewing out the guy who was on duty.' He grinned.

'Harsh.'

'It's Sully - he needs harsh sometimes to keep him from going full

asshole,' Maitra said. 'So, why don't you head over there? Clear the air or some shit?'

Cam's pulse thundered. He stood - legs shaky - and grabbed a t-shirt, pretending this was casual and not one of the biggest moments of his entire life.

'Cam?' Maitra said getting up himself and towering over Cam - not so much in height but in sheer bulk.

'Yeah?'

A lazy grin. 'Don't overthink it. And use small words? He's pretty dumb.'

Cam rolled his eyes — but he was already heading toward the far end of the terminal, toward the soft glow of the emergency lights that hung above the door that led to C-block.

And for once, he didn't overthink it. He just went.

C-block was cooler than the terminal. The air smelled faintly of sand and disinfectant, and the emergency lights flickered just enough to make the shadows crawl along the floor. Cam swallowed as he slipped inside, gently letting the door click shut behind him.

He expected silence. Instead he heard footsteps - slow and steady. *Liam*.

Cam's stomach flipped so violently he braced a
hand against the wall.

Liam halted when he saw him. 'Cam?' His voice a spine tingling rumble. 'What are you doing here?'

Cam made an attempt at words. 'I—uh. Hey.'

Liam blinked, slowly. 'Hey,' he echoed, confused but… softer than he normally was.

Cam stepped forward before he lost his nerve. 'Maitra said you were out here.'

Liam nodded, jaw tight. 'Of course he did.'

'And I just - I wanted to check on you.'

'Check on me?' Liam's brow furrowed, mouth twitching like he wasn't sure if he should be irritated or touched. 'Cam, you should be asleep.'

'I couldn't.' It came out painfully honest.

Liam shifted. 'What's wrong?'

Cam inhaled. 'I kept thinking about you.'

Liam's throat worked. He looked away, jaw flexing, then stepped closer - not touching, but close enough that Cam felt the heat rolling off him, and his next exhale shook: a real, actual crack in the armor. 'Cam…' he warned gently. But it wasn't a stop.

Cam stepped even closer - just enough that their shadows merged. 'I keep thinking about earlier,' he confessed, his voice embarrassingly soft, 'you know, after we got back.'

Liam went still except for his fingers twitching at his side, like he was fighting every instinct at once. 'Cam,' he said again, barely audible now as his pale blue eyes pinned him down, 'if we talk about that… things are going to get complicated.'

'I think we're long past complicated,' Cam said with an awkward chuckle. 'And I - *really* - don't care.'

A long silence stretched - tight, electric, not uncomfortable so much as charged. Liam's gaze dragged over his face, lingering at his mouth before snapping back up.

Cam's pulse slamned. 'Earlier,' he breathed, '*what you did* - did you mean to?'

It was vague, but how else could he ask without sounding like a complete idiot?

Liam didn't move. Didn't blink. But something in his stance shifted, the kind of subtle tilt that brought him half an inch closer without him realizing it. 'Yeah,' he said finally. Rough and full of gravel. 'Yeah, I meant it.'

Cam's breath caught, and he saw the tiny flare of heat in Liam's eyes when he noticed, and the way he leaned closer, just another half-inch.

Cam's inner-self took a sharp breath. "He's leaning. He's leaning. Oh my god, kiss him before you die."

Cam swallowed. 'Still just *friends*?' The question hung there, glowing like a fuse. Liam's jaw clenched and his inhale was sharp enough to hear. Cam felt braver then, reading between the lines of of half-spoken words and heated looks and he stepped closer - until their chests didn't quite touch but would if either of them breathed too deeply. 'I'll back off if you tell me to,' he murmured, cheeks flushed by his own shamelessness.

He shook his head, barely a movement. His fingers twitched like he wanted to touch Cam's jaw and didn't trust himself.

Cam finally found his voice. 'Liam… is this okay?'

Liam's laugh was soft and painful. 'No. It's fucking not. But I want to. God, I want to. But it's not safe. You saw what happened last time I -,'

Cam's breath stumbled out of him. 'I trust you.'

'Cam,' Liam said, voice low, rough. 'You shouldn't do that.'

Cam blinked, half-drunk on Liam's proximity. 'Do what?'

'Trust me.'

His instinct was to joke, to deflect, but the words died because Liam was so close - close enough for Cam to notice the way his breath shook. Close enough to notice that Liam isn't moving forward, not exactly, but swaying between wanting and stopping himself. Cam whispers, 'Then order me not to.'

That broke him and Liam closed the distance in a hesitant motion - braced for recoil - and kissed Cam. Soft. Almost unbearably soft. A question, not a claim. A dry slide of lips.

Cam froze for half a heartbeat, shock and heat stealing his breath, then kissed him back.Liam shuddered and cupped the back of Cam's neck with shaking fingers. Cam pressed closer, one hand gripping Liam's hip, the other clawing instinctively at his blouse. It wasn't perfect, *not like in movies*, but earnest, clumsy, open-mouthed warmth. Noses bumped, teeth clashed.

And it was was brief. Liam pulled back, lips parted, eyes heavy - asking a silent question Cam didn't need to hear to answer.

Yes. Always yes.

Liam's grip tightened on his jaw as he pulled him back in, deeper this time. Cam felt his blood rush south when Liam licked into his mouth - the taste of coffee, and the heat and hard line of Liam's body pinning him to the earth. Cam wanted more, needed more - but when his hand moved from holding to pulling, Liam broke away with a shaky inhale, their foreheads pressed together, breaths tangled.

'Cam, we shouldn't be doing this *here*, I can't just-,' He didn't finish. He didn't need to.

Cam's chest ached. His thumb traced circles on Liam's hip. Liam hadn't said we shouldn't be doing this. He'd said *here*. 'You don't need to explain,' Cam breathed.

'That's the problem,' Liam whispered, brushing Cam's jaw with trembling fingertips. 'I feel like I do. Like I need to warn you.'

Cam swallowed, eyes flickering from those blue-blue eyes, to freckles, to lips, 'You don't. You just -, you just have to be here.'

Liam's fear flickered across his face: shoulders tightening, expression shuttering.

So Cam leaned in and kissed the tense line of his jaw, whispering against his skin, 'You didn't do anything wrong.'

Liam's only answer was a humorless puff of air, but Cam felt him soften - just barely - beneath his hands. Cam slid his palm up Liam's chest, feeling the muscle jerk beneath his touch. 'I've wanted you to kiss me for years, I think,' he confessed. 'Kiss me again?'

'This is against the law, Cam.'

'I'm not reporting you. Are you reporting me?'

That broke the tension for real. Liam leaned forward, not kissing him, just resting their foreheads together, grounding himself. 'Nothing more than this,' he murmured. 'As long as we're *here*. Understand?'

"Don't you dare agree," his inner-self hissed.
Cam ignored him.

'Whatever you say, Sergeant. But kiss me. Give me that.'

Liam's hand slid to the back of Cam's neck - *guiding*, not forcing - as he slowly backed Cam toward the wall. Cam didn't notice until his

shoulders hit cool concrete, Liam's palm shielding his skull from the impact.
The wall was cold. Liam was heat. And Cam drowned in it as Liam pressed closer, closer - until one of Liam's thighs slid between his own, brushing where he was half hard drawing a soft embarrassingly winey sound from Cam that Liam swallowed down as he licked into his mouth.

He felt Liam's belt buckle press into his stomach, and he felt the hard muscles of his abdomen, the expansion of his chest each time he inhaled and it was so intoxicating Cam felt drunk off it -
and then Liam tore his mouth away.

Not violently. Not like he regretted it. But with a pained, gasping sound; like he was yanking himself back from the brink of something he wasn't sure he'd survive
His forehead dropped to Cam's shoulder, breath hot against Cam's neck, hands still braced on him like he couldn't fully let go.

'Stop,' Liam rasped. But the word broke in the middle, and his fingers curled instinctively into Cam's shirt, betraying him.

Cam froze, dizzy, pulse still running wild. 'Liam?'
Liam let out a shuddering exhale: frustration, hunger, fear, all tangled together.

'I can't,' he whispered, voice wrecked. 'Cam, I - fuck - I can't.'

Cam blinked rapidly, the wall cold behind him but his body burning everywhere Liam had touched. 'Did I - did I do something wrong?'

Liam jerked back at that, eyes going wide and wild, the freckles across his cheeks flushed. 'No. God, no. Nothing about this is wrong.' He swallowed hard, throat tight. 'That's the problem.'

Cam could still taste him. Still feel the ghost of Liam's thigh pressed between his legs. His own body wanted to lean in again, to chase the heat, the pressure, the relief waiting just under Liam's skin. But Liam stepped back a half-inch: not enough to sever the connection, but enough to show he was fighting himself.

'This is illegal,' Liam said, the words harsh but his tone unbearably soft. 'What we're doing. Right now. Here. If someone walks in - if anyone finds out - ,' He dragged a hand over his face like he was trying to scrape the desire off it. 'I won't let you get buried for this.'

Cam swallowed around the lump in his throat. 'I don't care.'

'I do.' Liam's voice cracked on it. 'I do, Cam.'

Cam's breath hitched. Something warm and painful bloomed in his chest. 'But I want -,'

'I know,' Liam murmured. 'I know you want me.' A pause, long and trembling. 'And I want you so much it scares the shit out of me.'

Cam's knees nearly buckled.

Liam reached out, just briefly, brushing Cam's cheek with the backs of his fingers, so gentle it felt like something sacred. 'If I don't stop now, I'm not going to stop at all.'

Cam's heart thrashed. 'Is that… bad?'

Liam let out a strangled laugh. 'Not the way you mean. Not for me. But for you? For both of us? Fuck.' He shook his head, stepping back another inch that felt like a mile. 'If I take more right now, if I let this go even a little further, we won't be able to walk it back.'

Cam opened his mouth - but Liam cut him off with a look. A pleading one.

'Cam,' he whispered, his voice gravel. 'I need you to hear me.' He cupped Cam's jaw again; not pulling him in this time, but steadying him. 'When we get home, when we're off deployment, away from this place, away from these goddamn rules-,' his thumb brushed Cam's cheekbone, tender. 'If you still want this? If you still want me?'

Cam's breath caught. 'I will.'

Liam's eyes softened, devastatingly so. 'Then we'll have time,' he said. 'Real time. I won't have to hold back. I won't have to pretend I don't want to touch you. We won't have to stop.'

Cam's whole body flushed hot. 'Liam…'

'Not here,' Liam said, forcing the restraint back into his voice. 'Not in a hallway. Not with a rifle slung over my shoulder like a goddamn bad punchline. Not with half the fucking Corp sleeping next door.' His thumb swept across Cam's lower lip, gentle, reverent. 'This deserve better than a stolen five minutes and a wall.'

Cam swallowed hard. 'I don't want better right now,' he admitted.

Quiet. Honest. 'I just want you.'

Liam closed his eyes like the words physically hit him. Then he stepped back. Agony cut through the air, sharp as a blade.But the look he gave Cam wasn't rejection. It was promise.

'Go back to the terminal. Get some sleep, or try to,' Liam said, voice low and steady, but his gaze flicked to Cam's mouth again before he forced it upward. 'When this mission ends, when we're stateside, when we're on leave - we'll talk. We'll figure out what this is.' A breath. 'If that's what you want.'

Cam nodded, almost dazed. 'It is.'

Liam's expression softened into something almost unbearably fond. 'Good,' he murmured. 'Now go, before I drag you back against that fucking wall and undo the last thirty seconds of self-control.'

Cam's cheeks flamed so hot he thought he might combust on the spot.

Liam saw it. Smirked, helplessly. Then looked pained again. 'Go,' he repeated, half-order, half-prayer.

Cam forced himself to turn away, his body buzzing, his lips still tingling and still half-hard.

Just before he reached the door, Liam called quietly, 'Cam?'

Cam glanced back.

Liam's voice was soft—but certain. 'It's what I want too.'

Chapter End Notes

Yeah...there goes the slow-burn.

Chapter 17: Chapter seventeen

Chapter Notes

My hand is healing - thanks for all the concern.

I was de-hemming some pants I was going to take in and I slipped - very dramatically.

I will however not be posting anything this weekend because I'm going on a little weekend getaway. As a peace offering I made this chapter pretty long - or at least it felt long with my awkward typing :-)

Holy hell, I just saw how many comments and views the last chapter had! Thank all of you for your interest and for sticking with me :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liam didn't sleep much that night - *it was becoming a pattern.* After guard duty, he'd lain flat on his cot while staring at the beams overhead while every moment from last night replayed with torturous clarity: Cam's breath against his lips. Cam's fingers grabbing his hip, pulling him in - and the kiss.

Fuck that kiss.

It that was supposed to last one second - a quick proof of Liam's feeling. Instead he'd proven exactly what kind of a fuck up he really was.
The kind that couldn't even decided if he was pissed off or proud that it had all ended with him sending Cam to bed…and then him jerking off in the restroom as he panted like a like a goddamn creep.

So when the lights finally flickered on and the room erupted with the rustles and chaos of too many Marines in too little space - and he actually felt relieved. Noise was better than the shit ricocheting around his skull.

He sat up, grabbed his shirt, and - a weight hit the edge of his cot.

'Jesus Christ, Bobby,' Rob muttered, low enough not to draw attention. 'You look like you slept in a chokehold.' Liam didn't look at him. 'Morning to you too.'

'Don’t,' Liam warned.

Rob ignored him with practiced ease. 'What happened?'

'You mean after you sent Cope to find me in the middle of the night like some goddamned courtesan delivery service?' Liam’s jaw clenched. 'Nothing.'

Rob barked a laugh. 'Right. That’s why the guy came back blushing so hard you could toast bread on him.'

'*Maitra*.'

Rob leaned back on his hands, smug as hell.
'Sullivan, buddy. Pal. Brother. You’re gonna tell me what happened, or I’m gonna start guessing out loud - and you know my guesses are not subtle.'

Liam exhaled through his nose. Long. Pained. *Resigned* to Rob's bullheadedness. 'We kissed.'

'Kissed, huh?'

He didn’t have to look to know Rob was smirking. He dragged a hand over his face; his skin felt three sizes too tight. 'It just… happened.'

'Right. Because mouths just randomly collide all the time.'

'It wasn’t - planned.'

Rob snorted. 'It kind of was. Not by you though - obviously - and honestly man, after two years of just you and your left hand I was gunning for a little more than kissing.'

Liam shot him a murderous glare. 'Prick.'

'Best kind though,' Rob said cheerfully.

Liam didn’t argue - mostly because he wasn’t wrong. 'What did you expect me to do? Screw him on a desk? I’m an asshole, but I’m not-,' he grimaced, '*that kind of an asshole*."

Rob waved that off. 'I know you’re not an asshole, you prick. But you're acting like the Good Lord didn't give you two hands and a mouth. It ain't love if you don't spend at least a little time kneeling at the altar.'

Liam nearly choked. 'Jesus Christ, Robby,' he hissed. 'Do you think I'm insane? Anyone could've walked in.'

'Like I wasn't watching the damn door like a fucking hawk,' Rob said unimpressed. 'You were too stuck in your head to use a golden opportunity to get off.'

He had a point. Though Liam would rather walk through fire than admit it to Rob - or even himself. And he fisted his fingers as he pushed back images of what could have been if he hadn't sent Cam back, if he'd dragged him into that restroom with him, all curious hands and hot mouths.

'You haven't gotten laid in two years, Liam. It's *weird*, man.'

'I almost got a discharge and a prison sentence,' Liam snapped. 'It's called being smart.'

Rob fixed him with a look.'You were never charged - you were never even *personally* under investigation. You're clean, Sully. But you might as well have gone to prison if you don't start living a little.'

Liam's stomach tightened. 'Because I-,' Liam stopped. Reset. 'He's *young*.'

'He's not that young.'

'He's inexperienced.'

'So? You've got enough experience for two people.'

Liam shot him a look sharp enough to cut. 'That's not funny.' And honestly not true, and he had a feeling Rob knew that.

Rob sobered, just slightly. 'Alright. Serious question then: does all of that make you not want him?'

Liam inhaled sharply. He didn't answer. Instead choosing to stare up at the ceiling.

Rob chuckled, reading the silence perfectly . 'I'll take that as a no.'

'It's complicated.'

'It is - but you're the one making it even more complicated.' Rob sighed. 'Cope - did he look like he minded to you? Because from where I was standing, he looked like he was about to float off the floor

when you sent him on his merry way. Shit man - he clearly likes you. And unless you've gone completely blind -,'

'He deserves better,' Liam snapped, harsher than Rob deserved, but he didn't even flinch. Everything Liam threw at him seemed to roll off him like water off a duck's back: steady, and dependant like a mountain - something Liam had never quite managed.

Rob scoffed. 'This song and dance - again, huh? So hit me with it: better than what? You?'

'Yes.' He was a selfish asshole that couldn't stay away even though he knew damn well Cam was too good to have to deal with the assortment of fractures of Liam's psychy.

Rob dragged a hand down his face. 'Christ, Bobby. You're not cursed. You just...you made a mistake. Cope's *not...him*, and you - you know you don't need to run and hide.' Rob shoulder checked him - his bad shoulder and the ache rattled his teeth, just like Rob meant to. 'So don't you even think about doing some dumb shit like protecting him or shit by pretending nothing happened. You're not protecting him man - you're just driving the guy nuts by confusing the hell out of him. You're good at that - trust me - *I'd know*.'

Over time, Liam had come to understand exactly how much his disappearing act in Guam and everything that had followed had messed with Rob's head - *another thing to put in his pack, another fail, another mistake.*

'Sullivan,' he said firmly. 'Look at me.'

Liam did.

'What do you want to happen between you and Cam?'

The air stuck in Liam's lungs. 'I told him we'd meet up on leave. That we'd try.' He blurted out before he could chicken out.

'Atta boy!' He said, thankfully slapping Liam's knee this time. 'So don't be a prick to him or he'll spend the whole day thinking he imagined whatever it is the two of you did out there.'

Liam swallowed hard. His pulse hammered. 'I'm not...pressuring him.'

Rob snorted. 'Buddy, I said don't be a prick. Not being a prick is not the same as pressuring him.'

Liam glared, but his throat betrayed him with a tight swallow.

Rob pushed himself up from the cot. 'We're all on sand clean-up - should give you plenty of time to you know have an actual normal conversation with him.'

Clean-up was it's own special kind of hell.
Sand on every surface, working its way into seams and boots and places no grit had any right to be, and every movement kicked up another fine cloud of dust that clung to them like they were part of the landscape. The Somalian sun was already vicious before noon, turning sweat into a second, unwelcome skin. Within an hour most of the men - including Liam - had stripped down to pants and boots, shirts abandoned after they'd stopped feeling tolerable.

'I fucking hate sand,' Rob muttered after finishing the mess-tent perimeter. From the swearing coming from inside the tent, the kitchen staff still had plenty of work which meant at least another day of MRE - which didn't exactly help moral.

'You're in the Marines,' Liam said. 'Sand's part of the package.'

'Sand and bugs!' Williams called cheerfully as he passed by. The guy was from Phoenix: heat barely registered for him.

'Guam was worse,' Liam said honestly as he helped Rob heave a gravel bag of sand onto the waiting truck.

'Yeah, those damn bugs nearly ate your ginger ass alive out there,' Williams chuckled, giving the bag an extra shove to help lift it in. 'Probably why they shipped you off to Parris Island.'

Liam froze mid-movement, a strangled laugh catching in his throat.

Rob didn't miss a beat. 'You know it - couldn't let pretty boy here die of malaria or some shit.'

'Only for him to nearly get offed by a fucking dumpster,' Williams added, with a grin.

Liam scoffed. 'It's been two years, man.'

'We'll still be talking about that at your retirement party,' Williams declared, dusting off his hands.

'As friends should,' Rob agreed with a grin.

Williams shot them both a salute with two fingers and headed back to work, and Liam followed him with his eyes until the guy disappeared around the truck bed, the easy grin still hanging in the air like leftover smoke.

Parris Island. The words sat in his chest like a fist.

He flexed his hands once, twice, the way he always did when his nerves misfired and the past slipped a boot between his ribs. Only Rob knew the details. To the rest of them, it was all jokes and the old story of the "*dumpster incident.*" A funny anecdote. A footnote in someone else's deployment.

To Liam, it was a door slamming shut.

Rob nudged him with an elbow—light, brief, but grounding. 'You alright, Bobby?'

Liam forced a breath. 'Yeah. Fine.'

Rob didn't call him on the lie, which somehow made the ground steadier beneath his boots.
They hoisted another bag together, sand shifting with a dull hiss. Liam focused on the weight of it, the strain on his injured shoulders, the gritty sting of sweat running into his eye. Anything but the crawling feeling that came with remembering Guam.

He wiped his brow and glanced instinctively across the yard - toward where he knew Cam was. He was crouched shirtless in the sun, cleaning sand out of a transmitter that had lost its tarp in the storm. The light ran along the smooth line of his back; his shoulders flexed with each movement. *It made an unfairly good view.*

But he wasn't alone. *That medic*. The one Cam was friendly with was there too. He was shirtless too, and his pants slung low enough to be a public nuisance. He was attractive, Liam would give him that much: cut, boyish, grinning at Cam like he had the right to..

Cam laughed at something he said.
That soft, shy laugh - *Liam had felt against his mouth last night.*

Next to him, Rob started humming, deadpan: 'Every step you take… every move you make…'

'Funny,' Liam muttered. 'Real comedian shit.'

Rob grinned. 'Still sure you're not jealous?'

Liam ignored that. Mostly.

Rob nudged him. 'Go. Talk to him. Before Baby SEAL over there starts offering him *medical evaluations.* And remember: be normal! No weird martyr shit.'

Normal. Right.
He could do normal.

He crossed the yard before he could second-guess it, Rob's amused snort trailing behind him: he knew he was going to catch a ribbing for this shit - but he would deal with that later.

Sebastian spotted him first and actually had the audacity to rake his gaze down Liam's torso before tossing a lazy salute. His mouth curled like he could smell the jealousy from fifteen feet away.

Cam turned at the movement, and his eyes flicked to Liam's mouth before he could stop himself.

'Hey,' Cam said quietly.

Liam stopped dead at that one look, and that one quiet syllable, but Sebastian filled the silence.
'Some storm, huh?'

Liam nodded. 'Everything good on your end?'

'Peachy.' Sebastian grinned. 'Field hospital's a disaster zone. So, I guess I should get back to pretending we can actually sterilize things in this country.' He shot Cam a look - and then Liam a knowing one. *Crafty fucker*. 'Talk later, Cam.'

'Yeah - see you, Sebastian.'

Liam resisted the urge to glare holes in the back of his head and instead cleared his throat. 'Need help?'

Cam blinked. 'Uh- yeah. Could you roll that tarp? Need to haul it back to storage.'

They worked side by side. Tarp scraping, boots crunching. Liam forced his breathing steady. Forced himself not to stare. Awkward wasn't new. But this - this wasn't the painful, avoidant, heavy silence Liam

had been bracing for. It felt different. A little too aware. A little too warm.

Snf it was Cam who broke it first. 'You didn't have to switch sides just for me.'

'I didn't.' *He had.* 'Wanted to,' he amended.

Cam's hands paused. He didn't look away: just stared at Liam like he was trying to read a page with half the words smudged out. 'So you're…' Cam hesitated and squinted. 'Not avoiding me?'

Liam huffed something between a laugh and a groan. 'No. Should I be?'

Cam's cheeks flushed, but his eyes softened, hopeful in that fragile, careful way that made Liam want to punch a wall and take his hand at the same time. 'No. I'm...glad you're not doing that anymore.' He bit his lip. 'Does that mean you're okay with… last night?' Bold.

Liam swallowed and his voice came out rougher than intended. 'I'm not… unhappy about it, if that's what you're asking.'

Cam's eyes went wide. 'Oh,' he breathed. 'Okay.'

Silence; heavy with everything unsaid.

'You good?' Liam asked softly. He shifted a little closer under the pretence of rolling the tarp. Not close enough for their shoulders touch, but close enough to feel Cam's warmth - and for Cam to feel him, his nearness, his choice.

Cam noticed. His breath stuttered. 'Thank you,'
He said voice soft, as he grabbed a screwdriver.

'For what?' Liam asked, confused.

'For… not pretending nothing happened this time. That would've really... sucked.'

Liam huffed out something like a laugh. 'Just trying to be normal.

Cam smiled, small and blinding. 'You're doing pretty good.'

Liam's pulse thudded.

'Cam,' he said quietly, 'if you want to talk about… what happened. Or

what might happen. We can. Later. Somewhere private.'

Cam's breath hitched; his eyes dropped to Liam's mouth again. 'Yeah,' he whispered. 'I'd like that.'
Liam nodded once, slow, decisive. 'Good.'

Cam held up something that looked vaguely important. 'This needs replacing. And the tarp needs to go back to storage. You want to help? It's easier with two.'

Liam recognized the excuse - and the invitation under it.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Let's go.'

Cam nodded, cheeks flushed, eyes bright

They picked up the tarp together, both knowing exactly where it would take them.
The walk wasn't long - just a few hundred yards - but it felt stretched thin, elastic, like time had slowed to a stop. They moved in the same rhythm, not touching but feeling every inch of not-touching.

Sand crunched under their boots. The sun glared down at them. Someone laughed across the yard. But none of it mattered compared to the slick shine off Cam's bare shoulders.

Cam cleared his throat softly. 'Now I get why you made us do all that cleaning at bootcamp: you were prepping us for sand storm clean-up.'

Liam chuckled. 'You earned that shit - *messy bunch of fuckers.* What with that food fight and that one fucktard who peed in the goddamn shower.'

'Jones.'

'What?'

'It was *Jones* - the guy who peed in the shower.'

Jones. The collateral damage, Liam had left in his wake. He'd tried to forget about him. 'I thought for sure it was Hicks,' he said.

'He was sleepwalking.'

That caught his attention. 'Shit that was true? I was sure he was faking.'

'Well if he was, he was like De Niro-level committed to the part,' Cam quipped. 'He almost peed on my feet.'

Liam bit back the urge to ask exactly what exactly Cam was doing with that cocky bastard in the showers at night. 'Do you know what happened to him?'

'He got what he wanted,' Cam said simply. 'Medical discharge. He wrote me - after. Wanted to make ammends. I didn't write back.'

They reached the line of storage container: sunbaked metal hulks with peeling number, and Cam angled them toward the one at the far end, the one shaded by the water tower, half forgotten. He set his end of the tarp down and wiped his palms on his pants. 'This is it,' he said, fishing a a bunch of keys from his pants and unlocking the padlock.

Liam lifted the roll again and Cam stepped backward into the dimness to guide it. When the door thunked shut behind them, the light shifted from gold to faint blue-grey, shapes reduced to outlines. Dust motes drifted lazily in a single thin strip of sunlight from a gap in the ceiling, catching on Cam's cheekbones, the bridge of his nose, the bow of his mouth. Liam realized he'd stopped breathing.

The tarp dropped with a dull, hollow thump.

For a beat, neither of them said anything. Cam's eyes flicked to Liam's mouth again, quick, instinctive, like he didn't even know he'd done it.

And that was it. Something in Liam snapped, quietly, cleanly. He stepped forward before he could second-guess it. Cam inhaled sharply, his lashes fluttering like he'd been caught doing something he wasn't supposed to be doing.

Liam cupped the back of Cam's neck before he could overthink it. Warm skin. Fine hair. The smallest, involuntary shiver under Liam's thumb.
'Good?' Liam asked, voice low, rough. Giving him an out.

Cam leaned into his hand like he'd been waiting hours for permission. 'Yeah.'

Liam kissed him. Not like last night: hesitant, shocked, too-fast. This was slow. Controlled. On purpose. Cam melted instantly, a soft thrum of breath escaping him as Liam's mouth moved against his. His hands coming up in a stuttered arc before gripping Liam's neck, his cheek, pulling him closer as their mouths met over and over again.

Liam pressed Cam gently back against a metal shelf, the clank echoing dully in the small space. Cam gasped - *surprised, not hurt* - and Liam he deepened the kiss, tasting Skittles on Cam's tongue as their chests slid together, dogtags jingling in the quiet of the container.

Cam broke away only to breathe, his lips brushing Liam's cheek, his throat, the corner of his jaw like he couldn't decide where to kiss next.

'Didn't like seeing you with that Medic,' Liam murmured, the admission scraping out before he could second-guess it. His thumb brushed the corner of Cam's mouth as he bumped their noses together. 'Tried to be cool about it. Failed.'

Cam huffed a breathless laugh. 'Yeah - he's definitely onto you. But don't worry, he won't say anything. Just thinks it's funny.'

Liam's fingers hooked in Cam's belt - nothing explicit, just enough pull, enough *suggestion* to make Cam's breath stutter in a way Liam felt everywhere. Rob's words about kneeling at the altar flashed across his mind - and for a second he considers dropping to his knees and swallowing Cam down, to *worship*, to *stake his claim* - but the door was unlocked and and the busy yard outside reeled him back. Instead he let one of his hands slip lower, cupping Cam's ass as he pulled him into another kiss; messier, hotter, dangerously close to more.

He broke away first, breath ragged.

Cam blinked up at him: dazed, pink-mouthed, pupils blown.

'Okay,' Cam whispered. 'That was…'

'Yeah,' Liam managed.

Cam's gaze dragged down Liam's mouth, lower still, and his breath caught.

'You can touch me,' Liam said softly. 'Just keep it -,'

Cam nodded, already reaching. His fingertips slid down Liam's throat, over his tattoo, over his chest, down his ribs and stomach, stopping just above his waistband tracing the ridges of the muscle.

Liam felt himself stiffen, and a sharp exhale punching out of him as his forehead dropped to Cam's. 'Dangerous,' he muttered, voice stripped raw.

Cam's fingers flexed at his waist; just enough pressure to send a sharp, electric shiver up Liam's spine. He exhaled hard against Cam's mouth, their breaths mixing in the dim container, the metal walls holding the heat close, too close.

Cam didn't move his hand lower, but the promise of it was enough. His thumb brushed the top button of Liam's pants once, tentative, asking without asking.

Liam's whole body answered. He kissed Cam again: deep, hungry, *almost* helpless - before dragging himself back with a low, unsteady groan. He'd promised himself he wasn't going to do this and he wasn't going to fuck up now.

'Cam -' His voice cracked on the name.

Cam stilled instantly, breath rushing out in a shaky burst. 'Sorry—did I —?'

'Too much,' Liam murmured, pressing his forehead to Cam's, one hand at the back of his neck to keep him close. 'Can't do that here - you get that, *right*?'

Cam swallowed hard, eyes wide and dark. His fingers curled in Liam's waistband like he didn't trust his own hands to behave. The silence pulsed with everything neither of them could do in here. Boots on gravel somewhere outside and the sound of voices helped reality settle back in.

Liam kissed the corner of Cam's mouth: slow and apologetic, but still full of want. 'We need to stop.'

Cam nodded, but it was the reluctant, pained kind of nod - the kind that made Liam's chest throb. 'Yeah,' Cam whispered. 'Okay.'

Liam brushed their noses together. 'Not because I don't want to.'

'I know.'

'Because I want to way too much.'

That got the smallest, breathless huff out of Cam—half laugh, half ache. 'Same.'

They stayed close for a few heartbeats, chests brushing, dog tags tangled, both breathing like they'd run laps. Then Liam forced himself

to step back an inch. Then another.

Cam followed the movement automatically before catching himself, a pink flush traveling down his throat to his chest, and Liam's eyes deliberately flicked down Cam's flushed chest down to where his hands awkwardly tried to cover the way his pants tented, and back up again.

Liam's voice dropped to something low and certain. 'When we're on leave… we'll have time. I promise.'

Cam's breath hitched so sharply Liam felt it in his spine. 'Yeah,' Cam nodded, quiet hope threaded through each letter.

'Yeah,' Liam said. 'Promise.'

A faint noise at the far end of the row of containers snapped them both fully back. Liam dragged a hand through his hair, smoothing it back into something vaguely decent.

'I'm - I'm going to need a minute,' Cam said making a face, as his cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

'I'm going to head out,' Liam said eyes heavy as he took one last long look at Cam flushed and wanting. 'How about you hang back - take care of things?'

Cam blinked at him owlishly. 'You mean...?' He made an awkward hand movement.

Liam's mouth quirked, fond. 'Yeah - it's what I did yesterday after I sent you to bed.'

Cam made a noise. 'Don't say that - for the love of God don't say that - I can barely function around you as is.'

Liam smirked. 'Guess I'll leave you to it then.' And with one last look - just because he could, he stepped back into the blinding sunlight, blinking as if he'd resurfaced from somewhere deeper, darker, and impossibly hard to leave behind.

And Liam knew - right there- that he was fucked.
Badly. And he didn't care.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will probably be a little in between chapter that

will lead us from Somalia to leave.

Chapter 18: Chapter eighteen

Chapter Notes

> Sorry, I've been super busy! Probably wasn't my best plan to go on a weekend-break right before some work deadlines and the holiday season.
>
> I'm on my Christmas break now (thank god) and after two whole days of catching up on my laundry - I'm back with a new chapter. The format is a little different: it's four loose snippets that explore Liam and Cam out on deployment before their break pops up.
>
> And now I guess I'll just go watch some Christmas movie while I feel bad about the cancellation...what the hell Netflix? Seriously - it's like they only cancel the good shows...

Semper Fi.

Cam heard and saw the words so often they barely registered anymore. Printed on banners, stitched onto uniforms, inked into skin,... background noise. A motto that followed him everywhere whether he wanted it to or not.

He was proud of being a Marine.
That wasn't the issue. He'd just never felt the need to announce it to the world. He hadn't joined the Corp out of legacy or idealism or even bloodlust. There was no family tradition to uphold, no patriotic calling ringing in his ears. He'd joined because Ray had suggested it, and at the time it had sounded… fine. A solid plan when he didn't have a better one.

Was he glad he did it? Sure.
Was it in his blood the way it was in Liam's, Ray's, or guys like Maitra? No. Not even close.
But just because he didn't feel that same pull to the Corps, didn't mean he didn't understand it.

Which was probably why Liam's tattoo had never really stood out to him. Half the guys on base had Semper Fi inked somewhere: ribs, shoulders, calves, bad decisions made on leave. It was practically standard issue - part of the uniform.

And honestly, Cam had never really looked at tattoo itself all that

closely, his attention always on the body it graced; the ridiculous unfairly attractiveness that was Liam Sullivan.

"Every wet dream you ever had rolled into one finicky ginger package?" His inner-voice quipped with a smirk.

"Rude."

But ultimately true, which was probably why it had taken him an embarrassingly long time to figure out there was something about Liam's tattoo...

"Probably because your brain turns to mush whenever he takes off his shirt."

"Blouse."

"Shirt - we're gay, but not that gay."

During the barrage of questions, the NCIS agent had asked him about DI Sullivan's tattoo. A tattoo he'd never seen at that point - despite the disbelieving arch of the agent's eyebrow - and her follow-up request that he'd take off his blouse had completely stumped him...and mortified him. But he'd never really put two and two together...

Ray had though. Ray whose brain decidedly did not turn to mush around Liam Sullivan, and who Cam had told the broad strokes of his questioning...

It all started on a particularly sweltering day. They'd been at lunch, and hardly anyone was still wearing anything that wasn't strictly necessary and Ray, with a casual tone but a serious look had gestured at Liam's tattoo with a fork and had asked: 'Where did you get that?'

Simple enough question.
But apparently not a simple answer...

His grin had dipped but he'd held Ray's gaze unblinkingly as he bit out: 'Guam.'

Before Ray could ask anything else, Maitra had barreled in with his usual all-eyes-on-me energy, declaring that Sully was lucky to still have all his limbs after getting tattooed in that "moist hellhole."

But Liam's face.

Cam had recognized that look immediately. He'd seen it during boot

camp, when Liam had been been *DI Sullivan* at his absolute worst.

After that day, Liam stopped taking off his shirt altogether - avoiding Ray with little subtly.
That was when even Cam; for all his hormones, obsession, and longing - finally caught up.
Liam's tattoo mattered. Not just to him. *To NCIS.*

But Cam didn't push. Didn't corner him the way Ray had. He waited. Waited until they sat outside the rec tent days later, the noise of darts and laughter spilling into the night. Liam smoked beside him, looking almost relaxed, shoulders loose, eyes half-lidded.

Perfect.

'Can I ask you something?' Cam said quietly.

'Shoot.'

Cam bit his lip, noticing how Liam tracked the movement out of the corner of his eye. 'Last week. When Ray asked about your tattoo - why did that bother you so much?'

Liam went still. Took a drag. Let it burn.

'I'm not proud of who I was,' he said finally. 'Back when I got it.'

'Guam?'

A nod. Sharp. Final.

'The NCIS agent asked me about it,' Cam said.

Liam's eyes flicked over. 'She did?'

'Asked if I'd seen it.'

A curse under his breath.

'Then she asked me to take off my blouse.'

For a moment, Liam looked wrecked: face drawn, lips bloodless - before he shook his head. 'Fucking crazy-ass bitch.'

He didn't bolt. Which felt significant, given his history. But tension rolled off him as he smoked the cigarette down to the filter in record time.

'I never understood why she wanted me to undress.'

Liam's expression darkened. Muscles in his neck and arms going taut. Cam wanted to reach out, to steady him, ground him - but he knew better.
Instead, he bumped his knee lightly against Liam's.

Liam took a breath, flexing his hands. 'Guess she wanted to see if you had the same tattoo.'

Cam blinked. 'How would I have gotten a tattoo in boot camp?'

'Fuck if I know,' Liam muttered. 'Probably wanted to uncover some secret faggot cult.' He rubbed his face, suddenly looking worn thin. 'I'm sorry. That you got dragged into this. Because of me.'

"You're worth it," Cam said - too quickly to pass for casual. And it made his cheeks flush.

Liam huffed. 'I'm really not.' He stared out into nothing. 'There's something I should've told you before I ever touched you. But didn't. Because what can I say? I'm a selfish fucking asshole.'

Cam fought to keep his expression neutral as panic crept up his spine.

'I'm not the only one with this tattoo,' Liam continued. 'I got it… with someone. A commitment thing.'

Something cold washed over Cam. Something sharp and unwelcome. It stung. Even though it really had no right to.

Of course Liam was more experienced than him. Of course he was going to have a history - had Cam expected that history to be of the...permanent commitment type?

No. Not really. But then again that NCIS investigating hadn't just happened...

'It's over,' Liam said quickly. 'Has been for a long time. But it still-,' He gestured vaguely. 'Still hurts. And I'm not proud of how I handled it.'

'Major Wilkinson,' Cam blurted out.

Liam's gaze snapped to him so fast Cam flinched. 'How the hell do you know that?' He demanded, his voice gravel - and Cam had a nasty flashback to DI Sullivan.

"Don't you dare cower Cameron Cope. You stand your ground," his inner-self demanded glaring at Liam tetchily.

"He's just panicking - he doesn't mean to-,"

"Stop apologising for him! He's a grown-man, if every feeling knocks him on his ass than that's his problem!"

He had a point. 'They mentioned him in my interview,' Cam said flatly, sounding less bothered than he was. 'Hard to forget one of the most bizarre experiences I've ever had. And growing up the way I did? Trust me that is saying something.'

"Oorah - I'm proud of you."

Liam deflated. 'Fuck. Of course.' He sank back, eyes closing. 'I'm sorry. I'm just… not great with this.'

Cam nodded, letting him breath for a while before finally asking: 'What happened to him?'

'Discharged,' Liam sighed. 'Thought it was because of me. It wasn't. Couldn't pin anything on me except the matching tattoos. And Semper Fi isn't exactly unique.'

'Then...?'

'Other guys. Guys just like me, according to Robby.' He huffed a humorless laugh. 'You'd think I'd be relieved. But I just felt...'

'Hurt?' Cam offered gently.

Liam nodded. 'Yeah.'

'He never told you?'

The anger never came. Liam swallowed, stared straight ahead, and nodded once.

'For what it's worth...I'm glad you told me.'

Liam looked surprised. 'You kind of forced my hand.'

Cam shrugged. 'You could have lied.' He'd grown up in the care of Barbara Cope, he'd seen firsthand how easy it was to lie and tended to appreciate it all the more when people didn't.

'I'm trying not to do that anymore,' Liam said. A beat, and then a quiet: 'Not with people who matter.'

Cam smiled as his inner-self gave Liam an impressed look: *"Will you look at that - progress."*

Liam had a bit of a daredevil streak to him.
All the boys in recon did. It wasn't a line of work you chose unless you were an adrenaline junkie with steady hands and a tolerance for bad odds.
Normally, he itched to get beyond the wire: dirt under his boots, rifle slung over his shoulder, Rob at his side, fire in his gut.

Liam liked the field. He liked being a Marine.

But this time was different...

This time, he was irritated at being sent out for at least ten days. Because despite the monotony - being stuck at camp, running errands that barely qualified as missions - Liam had been…content at the airport base camp. He was content being around a certain Corporal.

Things with Cam were…*easy*.
They'd eased whatever was between them down to a steady simmer instead of letting it boil over and burn them both. The connection was still there, but now it lived in quiet conversations between comrades, in hidden looks, in fewer than a handful of stolen minutes.
It was *calm*. It was *safe*. And Cam never pushed for more - not now that he understood the full scope of Liam's past. It was good. Healthy, even. A foundation for something Liam had never expected to have - at least not while he was in the Corps.

'You should get some sleep, Sully. I'm the one on watch - not you, man.'

Liam heard Lamb's heavy footsteps before the words. They'd long ago made a habit of never sneaking up on each other while armed; movements always telegraphed, especially in the dark.

Liam shook his head. 'Still too wired, man.'

He never slept well the first night out. He wasn't a relaxed man and never would be. And tonight was almost pleasant - cool without being cold, no floodlights washing out the stars.

Lamb grunted and hopped up beside him on the hood of the truck, a cigarette dangling from his lips. It was his first run back since sick leave.
All in all, he'd gotten off easy: the only physical reminder of that day, a thin pink scar through the blond hair at the back of his head.
All other reminders belonged to their nightmares - no matter how much Lamb claimed the day itself was nothing but a blank to him.

'Tommy's doing alright for a first timer, don't you think?'

Liam nodded. 'He's made of the right stuff. He'll stick around.' And the fact he'd gotten over Liam chewing his ass out for absolutely no reason was an added plus.

'Good,' Lamb said. "Cause you and Maitra are getting up there in age.'

Liam huffed and elbowed him. 'Watch your mouth, kid.'

'Just calling it like I see it -, *old man*. Pretty soon Maitra'll have a couple kids and fuck off to something nice and easy. And wherever Maitra goes, you follow.' He took a drag. 'That's just the way it is.'

Liam chuckled. 'We're not fucking Siamese twins, Lamb. Besides I'm hardly the domestic type.'

He didn't talk much about where he came from, but the guys knew enough. He never went anywhere on leave, someone else didn't drag him to; never talked about family; never had visitors of his own; the Maitras were listed as his next of kin...It was Recon, people filled in the blanks without needing things spelled out for them.

Beside him Lambert shifted, barely noticeable, and turned to look at Liam properly as he took another drag. 'Pretty nice of Cope to come see you off, though.'

Liam didn't freeze. Didn't react at all, really. It was an odd comment - especially considering what they'd been talking about, but it didn't have to mean anything.

'Think that had more to do with Robby's reputation with electronics.'

'You know Robby wasn't the only one NCIS talked to,' Lamb said

flatly, one eyebrow lifting in challenge.

The smile slid off Liam's face. 'I don't know what are you talking about man.'

'Back when you suddenly fucked off. NCIS asked me about your relationship with Major Wilkinson.' Lamb said his expression challenging Liam to deny it. 'I'd heard the scuttlebutt about him. We all had. Didn't take long to put two and two together.' A pause. 'I wasn't put in recon, just for my looks.'

The joke landed hollow - his tone didn't.
Of all the men in recon, of course they'd gone to *Jeremiah* Lambert from bumfuck *Idaho*. *The preacher's son*, who rolled his own cigarettes, read the Bible and kept a rosary in his pocket. If you were looking for someone who hated *faggots*, he probably was your safest bet.

But Lamb hadn't said anything. Not then. Not in the two years since. That had to count for something. *Right*?

'Lamb-,' Liam started, but the younger man raised a hand.

'It's okay.' Lamb stared out into the dark. 'Took me a while… *but it's okay*. I told them I'd never seen anything. And I'm sticking to that. Always will.' He finally looked at him. 'You hear me, Sully?'

Liam felt like he'd swallowed nails. He nodded. 'I hear you.'

'Just - play it safe,' Lamb said, eyes fixed anywhere but on Liam. 'What you're doing now? It's fine. You wouldn't notice unless you were looking. But don't slip. Cope's kind of…*queer*. But not too much. And people *like* him. They'll tolerate his…*business*. But you...you're not that likeable.'

Liam dissected every word with near-manic focus. Lamb was uncomfortable - clearly - but there was no anger. No disgust. Not from Jeremiah Lambert. Not from the preacher's son.

'You gonna act offended on me now?' Lamb muttered, breaking the silence. 'Don't pretend you don't know you're a polarising bastard.'

Liam huffed. 'That's not the part I'm confused about, Lamby. And you know it.'

'So,' Lamb said, flicking the cigarette butt to the dirt, 'we're talking about this?'

'Robby says talking is good.'

Lamb snorted. 'Robby is married to a hairdresser and whipped. Of course he says talking is good. Probably heard it from *Oprah* or some shit.'

'He might be onto something,' Liam shrugged. He swallowed, forcing the next words past the knot in his throat. 'So tell me, Lamb; are we good?'

The answer came instantly - but not carelessly. The set of his mouth, the glint in his eye, were deliberate. 'We're good, brother.'

The roof was still radiating heat even though the sun was long gone, the concrete was warm through Cam's fatigues as he shifted his weight and leant back on his palms. The airport lights stretching out below in a scatter of too bright white, cutting clean lines through the dark. .

On the other side of the roof, somewhere to his left, Sergeant Paulson was crouched over the second dish, muttering to himself and tapping at a panel with a wrench. Not close enough to hear them. But close enough to make this not-private. Close enough that Cam kept his hand firmly to himself.

The satellite dish in front of Cam hummed softly now, finally behaving after hours of sand-blown interference. He wiped his hands on a rag and glanced sideways: Liam was sitting with his back against a low concrete wall, legs stretched out, boots crossed at the ankles. His sleeves were rolled up - in that way that made Cam's mouth water - dog tags resting against his chest. He looked thinner. Or maybe just wrung out, like someone took him apart and put him back together in a hurry.

He should have been gone for ten days. But ten had turned to *twenty-six*. And delays - especially those kind of delays - were never because things went right.

Cam watched Liam's eyes flick shut - just for a second - before snapping open again like he'd been caught doing something wrong.

'You don’t have to stay,' Cam said quietly. Not pushing. Just offering.

Liam huffed, the corner of his mouth lifting. 'Didn’t think so,' he said.

Cam accepted that for what it was, and he turned back to the dish to tighten one last bolt, slower than necessary. He could feel Liam behind him without looking - the weight of his presence, the way he was just there in a deliberate way. Not hovering. Not demanding. Just… staying.

'That one giving you trouble?' Liam asked.

'Sand got into the housing,' Cam said.

Liam snorted. 'Figures. Desert always finds a way to fuck with you.' His already gravely voice, now so hoarse it bordered on painful.

Cam took a small sip from his canteen - just enough to make a show of it - then held it out wordlessly and very deliberately not looking. Liam and Slovacek shared that particular flaw: they bristled at help if it even hinted at weakness. Painfully hyper-masculine.

Cam thought it was exhausting.

But Cam's deliberate indifference did the trick. Liam took the canteen. Their fingers brushed, so lightly it shouldn’t have mattered, but Cam felt it anyway, a quiet spark under his skin, a shiver up his spine. Liam drank deeply, and passed it back. Oblivious.

'You look wrecked,' Cam said, gently enough that it didn't sound like a reprimand.

Liam shrugged, the movement sluggish. 'Long couple weeks.'

Cam waited. It was something he’d learned about Liam: if you left space, he sometimes filled it all on his own.

'The outside job went sideways - thats why it took so long,' Liam added after a moment. 'Not bad. Just… longer than planned.'

Cam nodded. He didn't ask for details. He knew better than that. Instead, he tilted his head, studying Liam’s profile in the spill of the runway light. The handsome lines of his face, the shadow under his bright blue eyes. The tension he carried like armor.

'Did you sleep *like...at all*?' Cam asked.

Liam’s jaw flexed. 'Some.'

Definitely a lie. Or at least a generous version of the truth.

Cam exhaled slowly and leant back on his elbows, looking up at the sky. It was hazy tonight, stars muted by dust and light pollution, but still there if you squinted. A few seconds pass by. Paulson cursed softly on the other side of the roof.

'Shit's always intense when it goes sideways,' Liam said suddenly. His voice rough, like it really had been scraped raw.

Cam’s chest tightened before he could stop it. He turned his head, really looking at Liam now, soft d. 'You should've gone straight to your bunk.'

'I know.' The words hang there, heavier than they should be.

Cam shifted closer; not touching, just aligning, their shoulders. Close enough that Liam would feel it. Close enough to be intentional. 'Why didn’t you?' He asked, softly.

Liam stared out over the runway, eyes tracking a distant vehicle as it crawled along the tarmac. 'Because I like knowing where you are. I like seeing you.'

Cam swallowed. There it is. Not dressed up. Not made smaller. Just the truth, laid out plain and a little dangerous.

He let a beat pass before answering. He wanted to get it right. 'I'm hard to get rid of - you know that better than anyone,' Cam said with a grin.

Liam’s breath caught - just a hitch, barely noticeable - but Cam saw it. Felt it, too, like something settling into place.

After a moment, Liam nodded once. Not big. Not dramatic. But something eased in his shoulders, like he'd finally allowed himself to rest against that idea.

They sat like that, side by side, listening to the low hum of equipment and the distant sounds of the base settling for the night, feeling the heat bleeding out of the concrete, the air cooling.

Liam’s head tipped back against the ledge. His eyes closing again - this time, he didn't fight it as hard.

Cam didn't move. He kept watch on the dish, on the roof, on the steady rise and fall of Liam's chest beside him. Let the quiet stretch, let it be what it was. And when Liam finally drifted - not fully asleep, but close - Cam allowed himself a small, private smile.

Over the months, Robby had worked Cam into their circle with such casual ease that no one had really noticed it happening.

Cam, however, didn't come alone. There was McCaffey, who still watched Liam like he was a fox nosing around a henhouse. The medic - *Sebastian* - who grinned at him like Liam was a particularly entertaining joke. And with that damned medic came a small gaggle of baby SEALs, all of them meshing easily with Rob—who'd never quite aged past twenty-one—and the younger guys in recon.

They'd gathered for the evening to play cards and shoot the shit, while Liam and Williams sat nearby cleaning their gear like two adults supervising a kid's party. And as Liam worked polish into his boots, a poker game spun up behind him, the conversation drifting wherever someone's half-baked thought happened to land.

He listened with half an ear.

'Lost mine after Sunday school,' Lamb said. 'Heather Watkins. Swim team. Excellent breath control.'

Liam had heard that story at least ten times. He was fairly sure Lamb's father would've shipped his son off on missionary work in the Arctic if he knew exactly how the church hall had been desecrated.

'What about you, Cope?' Sebastian asked. Liam caught the way the medic wasn't looking at Cam directly, but over his shoulder - straight at Liam, smirking. Fucking prick.

Cam laughed, awkward. 'I… *uh*-,'

'You a virgin, Cope?' one of the SEALs asked, teasing.

'He's not, and he has a girlfriend,' McCaffey cut in, still quick to protect his friend, and Liam's hands slowed, fingers rough with polish and suddenly clumsy. 'He's just embarrassed.'

Liam was surprised - and he knew it showed. He could feel the medic's eyes on him, amused. But he refused to look up, to take the bait. Sebastian's question felt deliberate now, needling, brushing dangerously close to something tender.

'Why?' Tommy asked, entertained. 'Was she that ugly?'

Liam kept his head down, listening far too closely, hating that he cared.

'No, no it wasn't like that," Cam said hastily. 'She was pretty and like super nice! *Really*. It's just… it was kind of a one-night thing before Kuwait. Met at a bar the weekend before we shipped out. And I might've been just a little drunk *so*...'

'Jesus, Cope,' Lamb barked. 'With the way you were hemming and hawing, I thought you'd killed the girl.'

Girl. The word didn't sit right. The story didn't sound fake - Cam was too embarrassed, McCaffey too sure - but the gender had to be wrong.

'Trust me, I wasn't good enough to kill her,' Cam muttered, making a face.

'First times are always clumsy as shit,' Rob said, clapping Cam on the shoulder. 'Practice makes perfect.'

Liam hated the sly look Rob sent him, as he found himself counting things that weren't his business: Cam's age at the time, how long ago it had been, what bar, what night - and, of course, who. It left a sour taste in his mouth. Cam wouldn't have been alone. His friends would've noticed if he'd flirted with a guy, left with one. So it had to have been someone safe. Someone unremarkable.

Liam pressed his thumb harder into the leather, as if friction might burn the thought away.

Around him the conversation moved on, but he couldn't: it gnawed at him. Not the sex, not even the experience - but the ease of it. That someone had been with Cope casually, without earning it.

And worse - the possibility that it had been one of the *other fuckers* he'd help turn onto Marines.

Jones came to mind first. He had written Cam - said it was about making amends. But maybe it hadn't ended there. Maybe he'd come to

see him. Liam had seen the way Jones looked at Cam, interest plain as day.

Then Nash. Ambitious, slippery. Happy to write faggot in a diary, but still prone to flirting - nothing blatant, just smiles held too long, glances that crossed the line by inches.

And then finally there was Slovacek. Loud, agressive, all alpha-male swagger. But he knew about Cam. Was comfortable with it. Touched him easily, casually. Straight, supposedly. But maybe not as straight as he liked to pretend.

The names circled in his head, ugly and persistent.

'You good?' Williams murmured, eyeing the way Liam's brush had stalled in one spot.

'Yeah,' Liam said. 'Just half-asleep.'

'Tell me about it - Robby running a goddamn daycare," Williams grumbled as he polished his belt buckle, sounding far older than his twenty-six years. It was a running joke that he'd joined the Marines just to get some distance from his five younger siblings. 'You're good with Tina; can't you ask her to give that man some babies? Maybe then he'll stop adopting strays. I didn't sign up to babysit Baby SEALs.'

Liam grinned. 'I think Tina's way ahead of you. Pretty sure she started picking out names the day Rob slipped a ring on her finger.'

'Daddy Maitra,' Williams chuckled. 'God help us all.'

'Amen, brother.'

Talking to Willy helped. It gave Liam something solid to focus on, something steady enough to keep his emotions in line. But the jealousy still gnawed at him, tightening him up, making him smaller - meaner - when all he wanted was to stay steady.

'I should head out,' Cam said eventually. 'I'm on comms duty tonight. Need to be at the airport in about an hour.'

Dutiful. Predictable. Liam had always known Cam would make a good Marine.

Cam said his goodbyes, smiling as McCaffey promised him a breakfast the Medic invited himself to, and Lamb heckled him for drawing the

short straw. And Liam just watched him go, chafing at the distance, at the fact that he couldn't be obvious - couldn't be the one claiming the morning or his company.

He waited a few minutes before following. Just enough so Williams wouldn't notice, but the Medic would. Just enough to be reasonable. Not enough to cool off.

Once he was out of sight from the guys, Liam broke into a jog and caught up to Cam easily. His hand closed around Cam's upper arm - too deliberate to pass for casual.

Cam startled for a beat, before smiling at him:
'Missed you tonight,' he said softly.

'Too much company for my taste.'

'I know, but -,' Cam frowned as Liam steered him off the path. 'Where are we - ?'

'You said you had an hour.' Heat crawled up Liam's spine, too steady to ignore.

'I do, but you said -,'

'You got your keys?'

Cam blinked, then huffed a quiet laugh. 'Oh.'

They walked fast and silent, boots biting into gravel, sleeves brushing too often to be coincidental. Liam's pulse thumped in his ears, hammering a rhythm he couldn't slow. He counted steps. It didn't help.

Cam fumbled with the lock once before it finally gave, metal screaming like nails on a chalkboard. Liam's jaw tightened, breath catching. He gave himself one more second. One breath to slow his pulse. To choose.

The door closed behind them. The latch clicked into place, sharp and final, and the camp sounds fell away. Darkness wrapped around them, thick and immediate, pressing against their skin. Liam's heartbeat thudded harder, each beat a reminder that the choice was his.

His mouth found Cam's without hesitation; demanding and precise, one hand cupping Cam's jaw while the other drew him closer, folding

him into his chest. He felt fingers curl around his dog tags, a gentle hand brushing the curve of his back, and the kiss deepened, hot and deliberate, releasing a tension that had been building all night. Cam melted into the kiss, clutching at Liam as if he could anchor them both, breath coming fast.

He'd thought the kiss would have steadied him. Instead, it sharpened everything. And if he didn't get himself in check soon - he'd be crossing lines he swore he wouldn't. He broke the kiss, breath heavy, his forehead resting against Cam's. His hands stayed firm at Cam's hips - anchoring, not trapping.

'Can I ask you something?'

Cam panted. 'Yes. Sure.'

'Earlier,' Liam said carefully. 'When they were talking. About your first.' A beat. 'It bothered me more than it should've and I -'

Cam shifted, surprised but not defensive. 'Because it was a girl?'

Liam pulled back just enough to see the outline of Cam's face: 'It was?' It was Liam's turn to be surprised. Cam had never seemed the type to posture, to prove himself straight to others.

Cam exhaled, something tight loosening in his shoulders. 'Slovacek kept saying you couldn't be sure unless you tried. That everyone thinks they're...completely one thing until they actually...*you know*...try *the other thing*.'

Liam felt the heat flare - but he held it as he parsed Cam's words: that definitely didn't sound like completely straight logic.

'So you tried?'

'*Once*,' Cam said. 'Because we were all a little drunk and at the time it really made sense for some reason.'

That...was something Liam couldn't judge. He'd done more than enough far more questionable things than Cam while using alcohol as a crutch...and he'd often used a similar kind of logic - the logic that got people hurt: *try it, prove it, survive it.*

'It was okay...but it wasn't...*right*," Cam finished. 'Not like this. Not like *you*.'

The jealousy didn’t disappear, but it shifted, blunted. Cam hadn't been reckless, he'd just been young.

'You don’t owe anyone proof,' Liam said quietly. 'Not him. Not me.'

Cam leaned in, forehead brushing Liam’s collarbone. 'I know. And honestly - I think Nick just wanted to make sure I didn't go to war a virgin. His friendship...works in mysterious ways.'

'I was worried it was Jones,' Liam said honestly- omitting the other two names not to sound completely unhinged.

Cam let out a disbelieving laugh. '*Jones*?'

'Never liked the way he looked at you,' Liam said honestly. 'Guy was too brazen - the kind they find out in a heartbeat. I didn't want that for you.'

Cam tilted his head, curious. 'Is this your way of saying your mind games at bootcamp were actually a scheme to make sure I didn't sleep with Jones?'

He wasn't proud of what he'd done to Jones. Not anymore. And he kept it in his pack to keep himself from making the same mistakes. 'I was in a strange place,' he said, his thumb drawing circles over Cam's cheek. 'Did a lot of dumb shit - and a lot of it was about you. I'm trying to be better about it now.'

Cam quirked an eyebrow. 'Like dragging me into a storage unit to make-out whenever you get what - *jealous*?'

Liam's lip quirked upward, and he slid his hand to the nape of Cam’s neck, suddenly grateful Cam was in need of a haircut because the hair was just long enough for Liam to run his hand through, tugging gently to manoeuvre Cam's mouth just right. The kiss was slower this time. Deliberate. Possessive, but not demanding.

Cam's hands moved under the hem of Liam's shirt, warm against his skin as they trace the muscle their, the warmth going straight to Liam's crotch - and part of him, the part that wanted Cam to know exactly how much Liam wanted him. How the waiting wasn’t doubt - it was being safe, it was protecting him instead of what he'd been doing for almost three years now: shutting it down, filling it away and never touching it again. But this was different - for Cam he'd stay.

And Cam...Cam was responsive, melting at every touch, shivering

when Liam's hand slid over his hip and palmed his ass.

Cam broke away with a breathless chuckle. 'At bootcamp, I always wondered if you were always so intense' It didn't sound accusatory - it sounded...fond. 'Finally have my answer.'

Liam's chuckle was all gravel. 'I knew you wondered about me,' he said softly, dipping his head so his mouth was right beside Cam's ear making him shudder. He pressed a kiss to his pulse, enjoying the way it jumped against his lips. 'I wondered about you too - probably more than I ought to.'

It was true. Half of his time as a DI had been worrying about the investigation - and the other half had been spent thinking about Cameron Cope. He would have seen this thing between them coming from a mile away if he hadn't been so scared shitless at the time.

Cam got a hand on either side of Liam's face and dragged him into another searing kiss. Bolder than he'd ever been. Liam returned fire, shifting so he could wedge a thigh between Cam's legs, not even trying to retain his composure as he rolled his hips at just the right angle. Cam moaned against Liam's mouth, making him shudder. He shifted his leg again, bringing Cam closer to him, letting Cam feel his excitement, pressed up against his own, and Cam made a sound against Liam's lips that was so wanton Liam knew he'd very hearing it on repeat in his dreams until they made it stateside.

Cam pulled back, eyes wide, chest heaving, mouth soft and wet. 'You need to stop,' he muttered, still clutching at Liam. 'I'm on shift soon - please don't make me come in my pants.'

Liam huffed a soft laugh, forehead dropping to Cam's shoulder. 'I'm sorry.' But he didn't let go right away. He stayed there for a second longer than strictly necessary, hands still warm at Cam's hips, breathing him in. Then - deliberately - he eased back, giving Cam space without stepping away entirely. 'Soon,' Liam said quietly. Not a promise spoken lightly. Not a tease. A plan.

Cam's fingers tightened once in his shirt, then relaxed. He nodded, the ghost of a smile tugging at his mouth. 'Soon.'

They lingered in the dark for another beat, close but no longer pressed together, the container humming softly around them. When Cam finally turned for the door, Liam watched him go; steady, grounded, heart still racing but under control.

He waited until the latch clicked again, until Cam's footsteps faded. Only then did Liam exhale, slow and deep, letting the want settle into something he could carry.

Stateside wasn't far. And for the first time in a long while, waiting didn't feel like losing.

Chapter 19: Chapter nineteen

Chapter Notes

> I hope everyone who celebrated Christmas had a merry Christmas and everyone who doesn't - had a nice few days anyway :-)
>
> Not a lot of Cam- but I might still have gone a little overboard with the sap in this chapter. But I've had a romantic Christmas, and I'm probably channeling that energy. It'll clear up by the next chapter...probably

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liam had never been one to fixate on homecoming dates.

Mostly because home had always been a loose concept at best. He didn't return to places so much as rotate through them: bunks, barracks, borrowed couches - the only real constant the brothers he'd made in the Corps, and now the home Rob had helped him built.

And besides, departure dates were rarely set in stone. Delays were standard. He could count on one hand the number of times he'd actually left on schedule.

But now, now that he was leaving on time, it was all he could think about. He packed with more force than necessary, checking boxes twice, shoving gear where it already fit. His trunk sat in front of his bunk, almost fully loaded, accusingly prepared.

Because he was going home before Cam.
And that did something to him. Something sharp and restless. Something that made him wish - not for the first time - that he could have a drink.

'Stop.' Lamb didn't look up from his bunk, cigarette paper pinched neatly between his fingers.

'Stop what?' Liam asked.

'The passive-aggressive packing,' Lamb said. 'You're handling that gear like it owes you money.'

Liam clenched his jaw and shoved a strap through a buckle, cinching it tighter than necessary.

Lamb licked the paper, sealed the cigarette, and finally glanced up. His eyes were sharp: 'This is because you're leaving,' he said. Not a question.

'On time,' Liam replied. 'Orders came through an hour ago.'

Lamb hummed. 'Huh. Look at that. Miracles do happen.'

'Don't,' Liam muttered.

Lamb leaned back against the bunk frame, cigarette unlit between his fingers. 'You've been a prick all day.'

'I've been busy.'

'You've been stalking the comms tent like it might grow legs and walk off.' Liam shot him a look. Lamb raised an eyebrow.'If I've noticed - Robby is definitely going to notice and he is going to be way worse than me about it.'

Liam groaned. '*Fuck*.'

'Look,' Lamb said more seriously, 'you think I'm competent, Sully?'

Liam blinked, thrown. 'I'd trust you with my life.'

'Good.' Lamb nodded once. 'Then trust me with his.'

Liam's hands stilled.

'I volunteered to stay,' Lamb went on. 'Relief squad's green as hell. Command wants continuity - someone who knows the AO, knows the locals, recognises when a situation's about to go to shit.'

Fuck. Liam didn't like that. Not at all. After Guam, he'd sworn he was done being the guy who left other people behind. But here Lamb was, volunteering to stay behind - and part of Liam, the asshole part, wondered if Lamb was looking for a way to get away from him.

'And what does that get you?' Liam finally asked, disapproval etched in every line of his face.

Lamb's mouth twitched. 'A line in my file that says leadership under transition conditions. Looks real nice when someone's up for a position.'

That tracked.

'Means I'll be around,' Lamb added. 'I'll keep an eye on Cope. Make sure he eats. Make sure he sleeps. Make sure he doesn't do anything dumb.'

Liam exhaled slowly through his nose. 'You don't owe me that.

Lamb snorted. 'Relax. I'm not doing it *just* for you.'

Silence settled between them, heavy but familiar.

'So...you gonna tell him?' Lamb asked, a little awkward.

'Yes,' Liam said immediately. Then, quieter: 'I have to.'

Lamb nodded. 'Yeah. You probably do.'

Liam closed the trunk. The sound landed hard in his chest.

'He's gonna be fine,' Lamb said. 'Just… don't turn this into something ugly on your way out. That talking thing...you're not good at it Sully.'

Liam paused at the tent flap. 'Not planning to.'

Lamb smirked faintly. 'Good. Because just 'cause I'm okay with shit doesn't mean I'm having long conversations about *feelings*. You hear me?'

Liam huffed a quiet laugh as he stepped out into the heat, the noise of camp rushing back in. He turned toward the comms tent.

The comms tent was louder than he remembered; radios crackling, voices overlapping in clipped bursts. Liam paused just outside, letting the noise wash over him. *Get in. Say it clean. Don't make it heavier than it already is.*

Wood saw him first, and greeted him with a nod and a wink. Liam was pretty sure the tall man at least suspected something - and had decided not to care. It wasn't farfetched. He'd liked Cam enough to ask Liam to look out for him, and his general disregard for protocol and rank only added weight to the idea.

Cam was seated at a table, a console in front of him. A headset hung loose around his neck, and he gnawed at his lip as he jotted something down. He hadn't noticed Liam come in, too focused on his job. And part of Liam, the part that had decided Cam would make a good

scribe, was proud.

'Cope.'

Cam looked up, surprise flickering across his face before it softened into a smile. 'Hey Sarge. You done already?'

'For the day.' Liam stepped closer, lowering his voice. 'You got a minute?'

Cam glanced at the board, then nodded. 'Of course. Two, even - since it's you.'

They stepped just far enough to the side to be out of the main flow, a dark corner of the tent that felt...private enough.

Liam didn't sit. Didn't lean. Just stood there, hands loose at his sides. And he ripped off the band-aid. 'My rotation date came through,' he said. 'It's official.'

Cam blinked. 'Oh.'

'I'm wheels up in forty-eight,' Liam added. 'On time...for once.'

Cam absorbed it quietly. No dramatics. Just that small tightening around his eyes Liam had learned to read. 'That's… soon,' Cam said.

'Yeah,' Liam said, for lack of a better response.

'You're heading stateside,' Cam said carefully, hands shifting as if he wasn't sure what to do with them.

'I am.'

'Soon.'

'Right.'

Liam watched him recalibrate, the Marine reflex kicking in before he nodded once. That made something stutter inside Liam's chest. 'Okay.'

Liam shifted his weight. 'I wanted you to hear it from me. Not secondhand.'

'I appreciate that,' Cam said. He meant it. And that made it worse. Liam felt the urge, sharp and dangerous, to reach for him. He didn't.

'You're solid here,' Liam continued. 'You've got a lot of people that have your back.'

Cam huffed quietly. 'You're planning my after-action?'

'Habit,' Liam said. Then, more honest: 'And because I worry.'

That got Cam's attention. He really looked at Liam now. 'I was kind of hoping,' he said slowly, 'that we'd rotate together.'

'I know.'

They stood there, the tent humming around them, the unspoken pressing in.

'Stateside,' Cam asked, 'am I still visiting you…and Maitra when I get back?'

Liam met his gaze. Held it. 'I'm not disappearing, the invite stands,' he said. Not a promise dressed up as romance. Just fact.

Cam nodded, something easing. 'Okay,' he quirked a smile, crooked and soft, 'I'm looking forward to it.'

Liam hesitated, then reached out and squeezed Cam's shoulder. Brief. Steady. 'You've done good work here, I'm proud of you.'

Cam swallowed. 'You don't say that a lot.'

'No,' Liam said. 'Only when I mean it.'

Cam smiled at that; real, warm, and a little sad.

A voice called Cam's name. Cam grimaced. 'I'm up.'

'Yeah.'

Cam stepped back, then paused. 'Hey.'

Liam looked at him.

'Don't forget me,' he said eyes twinkeling mischievously.

Liam's mouth twitched - not quite a smile. 'Not a chance, Cope.'

Cam grinned and went back to work. Liam stayed one beat longer, then walked away - spine straight and shoulders squared. *He'd done*

the right thing. Told Cam cleanly. No half-truths, no vanishing act. But it didn't make it easier...

Things blurred into routine after that.

Liam had done this dozens of times. Traveling was a skill he'd perfected early: pack light, don't linger, don't look back. The Corps made it easy. People came and went. Rotations shifted. Loss blurred into logistics and debriefs. And by the next time he really had a chance to stop, to breath: Liam was stateside, wedged into a civilian plane that smelled like recycled air and burnt coffee.

He sat by the window, seatbelt buckled, hands flat on his thighs like that might keep everything in place. Rob was beside him, too broad for the seat, knee knocking Liam's - but neither complained.

The engines whined. The aircraft lurched forward and lifted. Liam's stomach dropped; not from the ascent, but from the finality of it.

He was going home. Without Cam.
No delays. No alarms. No last-minute orders pulling him back. Just *distance*, stacking mile by mile. The seatbelt sign chimed off. Someone laughed too loudly a few rows up. Normal life surged on, oblivious.

For most of his adult life, everything he wanted had lived under impossible. *Men like him didn't plan futures.* They managed exposure. Mitigated risk. Survived scrutiny. And yet here he was: still in his fatigues, his best friend jammed into his side, his heart wrapped around another man like it was something he was allowed to keep.

It was reckless. Dangerous. But for the first time, it felt like something he could actually have.

'You good, Bobby?' Rob asked, glancing at the way Liam's hand had locked around the armrest.

Liam forced his fingers to loosen. 'Yeah. Just wired.'

Rob bumped their shoulders. 'We'll be home soon. Hot food. Privacy.' A grin. 'And company before you know it. Tina's already planning.'

Liam smiled; small, but genuine.

It was Tina who picked them up at Ellis Airport. Of course it was.

Big hair, big smile, and a bright red dress you couldn't miss. She

spotted them immediately and barreled in like a force of nature. She kissed her husband hard, laughed into it, then turned and wrapped Liam up just as firmly, pressing a lipstick-stained kiss to his cheek and hugging him like she might actually carry him off if Rob let her.

'Look at you,' she said, pulling back to study him. 'Skinny as hell. I swear, next time I'm mailing you more food whether you like it or not.'

And after kissing Rob one more time - *long enough to make Liam uncomfortable* - she took them home. To their home, if Liam was being honest. It was a modest family home, still waiting for kids to fill the bedrooms, but already home to a Labrador named Bubbles. Officially Rob had gotten him as a guard dog for Tina, but he mostly just functioned as a warm, immovable doorstop.

Liam lived a couple of blocks over in the middle of town. He'd bought the place the year before, and he and Rob had spent most of their leave tearing it apart and putting it back together again. Liam took the first floor; and Tina ran her hair salon out of the ground level, which meant she kept an eye on the building - and Liam's truck - whenever he was deployed, whether he asked her to or not.

It was good. It was solid. It was a family he'd never really had before.

That night Tina fed them veal shanks and polenta, moving around the kitchen like she owned gravity: spoon tapping, oven opening, wine poured without measuring.

And Bubbles had parked himself squarely at Liam's feet, chin heavy on his knee, eyes hopeful.

'I do not feed the dog from the table,' Tina said, without looking down.

Bubbles' tail thumped.

'No one looks at Bobby and thinks 'easy mark,' T,' Rob said, waving his fork at the dog. 'This is a trained animal.'

'Oh please,' Tina snorted. 'You got him as a guard dog and he cries if the mailman ignores him. I love him, but he's a big idiot.'

Liam scratched behind Bubbles' ear. 'Big. Not too bright. Definitely your type.'

'Well fuck you too, Sully,' Rob said cheerfully, flipping him off. 'Guess I'll just get Cope a prissy little ginger cat. Balance the household.'

Liam returned the gesture without missing a beat.

Tina shoved her plate to the side and leaned forward, elbows on the table, chin propped on her hands. Her dark eyes glittered with interest. 'I've been waiting for that name to come up.'

Liam groaned and nudged Rob under the table.

Rob just shrugged and tore off another piece of bread. 'Take it like a man.'

'You cannot just drop that and move on,' Tina said. 'It's rude. And suspicious. Also romantic. Which means I need details.'

'We're really pretending Rob hasn't already told you everything?' Liam said.

Rob grinned, unrepentant. 'Some men swear "*sickness and health*". I swore "*the truth, the whole truth*".'

'Just tell me about him,' Tina said, pouring herself a generous glass of red. She reached for Liam's glass too, then paused as Rob gently intercepted the bottle.

'One glass for Bobby,' he said easily. No judgment. Just fact.

Liam felt the familiar mix of irritation and gratitude, and let it go.

'Right,' Tina said, refocusing instantly. 'Sorry. I'm just… *Cam*. I still can't believe Liam has *a Cam*.'

'I don't *own* him,' Liam muttered.

'Whose fault is that?' Rob shot back.

Tina waved a hand. 'I think it's sweet. And smart. You take your time. That's how you build something that lasts.'

Rob scoffed. 'They're Marines. We spend seventy-five percent of our downtime thinking about sex and they could've actually been having it.'

'It would've been too risky, you big lug,' Tina said. 'And not very romantic.'

'T - they're still guys,' Rob said making a face. 'Romance isn't high on the priorities list.'

Tina gave him a look.

Liam pushed his chair back slightly, rubbing at the back of his neck. Bubbles looked put out for a second, but then quickly regained his good mood. 'I'm gonna head out.'

Tina blinked. 'Already?'

'Long trip,' he said. 'Didn't sleep on the plane.'

She studied him for half a second longer than necessary - reading between the lines like she always did - then nodded. 'Okay. But I'm packing you leftovers for lunch.'

'We going running tomorrow?' Rob asked as his wife grabbed a tupperware container and filled it with more food than Liam needed.

'We just got back, and you already want to go out running?'

Rob nodded at Bubbles. 'He could stand to lose a few - especially since he's getting fat off of thin air - *allegedly*.'

'Don't say that, you'll hurt his feelings,' Tina said handing Liam the container before looking up at him doe-eyed and smiling in that way that always meant trouble. 'When you get home,' she said sweetly, 'you're going to see something. You have to promise me you won't get mad.'

'Tina,' Liam sighed. 'What did you do?'

Her smile tipped toward devilish. 'Well I cleaned and after that I might've gotten a little carried away.'

'Carried away how?'

'Well...call me an optimist,' she said quickly, hands up. 'I thought - maybe - Cameron might come back with you. And I figured, better safe than sorry.'

'Tina -,'

'Okay, goodnight, Bobby. Love you,' she hugged him hard and kissed his cheek - and then she was gone, already halfway up the stairs. 'See you tomorrow for dinner - no excuses!'

Liam stared after her, then looked at Robby.
'What did your wife do?'

Rob shrugged, amused as he followed Liam to the front door. 'Could be anything. Rainbow mural. Pottery wheel. You know she likes projects.'

'Pottery wheel?'

'She really loves Swayze, man.'

Despite himself, Liam snorted. 'Now I'm really fucking terrified.'

Rob pulled him into a bear hug at the threshold, squeezing tight. 'You good on your own?'

'Looking forward to a hot shower and a soft bed.'

Rob nodded, satisfied — but he didn't close the door until Liam was in his truck and pulling away.

When Liam got to the apartment, it smelled clean and faintly floral.

Candles were everywhere, grouped neatly on every flat surface. Tasteful. Intentional.

He dropped his duffel and took it in. The candles were odd, but they didn't irritate him — which meant something else was coming.

Instinct carried him down the hall.
He stopped in the bedroom doorway.

A jumbo box of condoms sat on the bedside table, flanked by several bottles in varying shapes and sizes. He picked one up, pulse loud in his ears, already knowing.

Astroglide.
Specialty lube. Purpose-made.

His best friend's wife: the good Italian girl, who wore a crucifix the size of her palm, had walked into a sex shop and bought supplies specifically for *anal sex*.

Liam sat down heavily on the bed and scrubbed a hand through his hair. The bottle slipped from his fingers and bounced once on the mattress, faintly mocking.

He'd thought about taking Cam to bed. Of course he had. He wasn't a monk. But it had always stayed abstract - distant enough to be safe. Trust Tina to drag it into the light.

Cam was inexperienced. *Green*. And Liam… *wasn't nearly as seasoned as he looked*.

There had been two men. Two he'd gone all the way with.

The first had been just after his twenty-first birthday: finally old enough to drink, finally filled out enough to be noticed. He'd driven four hours to a place meant for men like him, chosen someone a few years older than him. He'd been nice, patient and careful, he'd used a condom and real lube. And some of it had been good - nice, even. But it still had hurt...a lot.

Aaron came later. Guam was..Better intentions than tools: Vaseline and coconut oil. Still, Aaron had taught him how to make it *mostly* good. But Aaron had been confident, experienced, and Liam was... *less* so.

He sat there for a moment, elbows on his knees, breathing through the tightness in his chest. The thought of hurting Cameron Cope, *physically*, this time, coiled hard and unwelcome.

Hastily, he gathered everything and slid it into the bedside drawer, shutting it with a slam.

He sat there for a minute, letting the apartment around him settle, letting his pulse settle.

Then he opened the drawer again. He didn't flinch this time: he lifted the condoms, turned the box once in his hands, then set it back, thumb brushing the cardboard edge. He imagined Cam's fingers there instead, hesitant at first, then surer. The way Cam watched him when he thought Liam wasn't looking. The way his voice softened when he was tired.

Liam closed his eyes and breathed: things between them wouldn't be *rough*, wouldn't be *hurried*. He knew that. He'd be careful. Learn the weight of him, the heat, the places that changed his breathing. Learn how to touch without taking.

He arranged everything neatly this time, bottles lined up, box squared. Not hidden. Not rushed toward. Simply waiting.

Tina had meant well. She always did. She believed in preparation as a kind of love - and she was about as subtle as her husband.

He closed the drawer again, slower now. With a gentle click. After that; he stood and stripped down, shedding boots, shirt, the last of the road and the flight and the months that still clung to him. The shower helped: steam curling, water tracing lines over his shoulders, down his spine. He braced a hand against the tile and let the heat soak in, let the want settle into something manageable. Cam stayed with him anyway. His laugh. His careful honesty. The way he said Liam's name like it mattered.

Later, clean and barefoot, Liam stood in the bedroom doorway and looked at the bed.
And he realised he wasn't waiting out of fear.
He was waiting because he wanted it to be right.

Chapter End Notes

Full disclosure: I know I skipped over several steps in the coming home process. But the show didn't show every single step, so I didn't think I had to either.

Chapter 20: Chapter twenty

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year to everyone who celebrates!

I live in a fireworks allowed kind of town, so we don't celebrate on New Year's Eve because we all have pets to keep company.

So I decided to post today before my partner and I hunker down with snacks and a movie, and we spend tomorrow with family and friends :-)

I wish you all a great and happy 2026 and I hope you enjoy the chapter of course!

It was easy to keep busy after Liam left.
It wasn't as if they spent all their time together when he'd been at camp. But Cam did miss the small things; the half-glances he'd learned to steal; the quiet reassurance of knowing Liam was somewhere nearby, solid, accounted for - unable to disappear the way he had back in the swamp.

Work helped. Ray - Slovacek whenever he dropped by - and Sebastian, plus a rotating cast of SEALs, filled a lot of the space. So, he wasn't lonely - not exactly. But there was a low, persistent gnaw just beneath his ribs that told him something was missing...
And something was coming.

He had his date now. Soon he'd be on a plane back to the States. After that: Jacksonville, North Carolina, and Liam Sullivan.

For now, though, he was still in Somalia. Still in a mess hall where the food somehow managed to get worse every week. Slovacek was back at his own base prepping for rotation, Ray was on duty tonight, and for once it was just Cam and Sebastian. He'd just gotten off field hospital duty, which meant there was no stray SEAL tagging along. And they were late enough that the mess was mostly empty, no friends still loitering around, just soft clatter, and scattered groups - though Cam's inner monologue was loud enough to make up for it...

"This is your chance," he said as Cam prodded at his overcooked rice. "Ask

for pointers. He's clearly been there, done that - and all you've got is the porn your girlfriend got you last Christmas."

"I am not asking the one gay friend I have to explain gay sex to me," Cam muttered.

"Fine," his inner voice threw up his hands. "But don't come crying to me when you make an absolute fool of yourself when Sullivan's pants finally come off."

Cam's shoulders crept toward his ears.

"I'm sure he'll love it when you snap back into recruit mode and ask him for instructions." A pause. "On second thought...he seems like the type who might actually be into that."

Cam made a sound that absolutely should not have escaped his body.

Sebastian looked up, concern and amusement warring on his face. 'You dying, Cam?'

'No - no, I'm not...dying,' Cam said quickly. He put his fork down and inhaled, like oxygen might reset him.

"You can do it," his inner voice encouraged smugly.

'I have an embarrassing question, Cam blurted.

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. 'We're friends, man. And I'm a medic. I've diagnosed people with the clap. I honestly don't think there's anything you could ask me that would embarrass me.'

Cam swallowed. 'Embarrassing for me.'

Sebastian grinned. 'Everything embarrasses you, Cam. It's part of your charm.' He leaned back, relaxed and oozing confidence in a way Cam envied. 'Shoot.'

Cam closed his eyes. 'I need you to give me sex advice.' He rushed the words together, barely breathing.

But when he opened his eyes, Sebastian wasn't laughing - he was just looking at him, fondly.

'You don't need advice, man,' Sebastian said easily. 'I'm sure Sullivan will be more than happy to walk you through it.'

Cam flushed hot. 'I- I don't want to go *in...blind*,' he stammered.

Sebastian hummed, tilting his head. 'Exactly how green are you, Cam?'

'You know everything there is to know,' Cam said, suddenly very interested in the table. There was Britney from the bar and Barry from the club and their *exploit* in the alleyway - *and that was it;* the total sum of his sexual experience.

'What about solo stuff?' Sebastian asked. 'You ever...' he wiggled his fingers, 'played around *down there*?'

Cam's face burned. 'Uh - my last leave, Ana. You know, Slovacek - my *girlfriend*?' He swallowed. 'She took me to a special kind of store. I bought this thing. To see what I liked.'

Sebastian's eyebrows rose. 'And?'

'I tried it in the bathtub,' Cam admitted face burning. 'And it was going - I'd say pretty well.'

'I sense a but.'

'I knocked the lube off the side of the tub,' Cam groaned. 'Cheap plastic bottle. It exploded. There was lube everywhere.' He covered his face. 'It was a nightmare to clean up.'

Sebastian chuckled. 'And after that you just gave up?'

Cam slid lower in his chair. 'You haven't heard the worst part.'

'Well, don't leave a man hanging, Cam.'

'The next morning Slovacek wanted to take a shower…'

Sebastian winced. 'You left the toy out?'

'No!' Cam shot him an affronted look. 'But the lube...it left residue? Even after cleaning. And when he stepped into the tub, he slipped...and fell. Hard.'

Sebastian burst out laughing.

'He got pretty mad, which I get,' Cam continued miserably, his voice dropping into a whisper, as the memories flooded back to him with painstaking detail. 'He told me to cut it out because he didn't want to see "fucking Jesus" every time I wanted to play with my ass.'

Sebastian wheezed. 'He really said that?'

Cam nodded. 'And then we had to go to the ER,' he added. 'Two stitches. It was so embarrassing.'

'Yeah, okay,' Sebastian said, grin still tugging at his lips as he tried to compose himself. 'I can see how that might have traumatised you a *little*. But listen,' his tone softened, 'if you want to do that kind of stuff with Sullivan. You need to get used to it a little, okay? Sullivan's got that *I'm-packing-walk*, and you can't just start big.'

Cam blinked. 'You can't?'

'Not unless you want it to suck,' Sebastian said making a face. 'But if you're not comfortable with that - and he doesn't want to do things the other way around...there are other ways to get off, you know?'

Cam groaned. 'I don't have a lot of experience with that either.'

Sebastian smiled, not unkind. 'It's a turn-on for some people.'

'Judging from all the yelling about incompetence he did back at boot camp,' Cam muttered, 'I really doubt he's like that.'

Sebastian smiled. 'A mouth always feels good,' he offered with a shrug. 'No heroics required: just lick, suckle, whatever works for you.'

"I'm going to die," he said to his inner-self, as he felt his cheeks burn. 'Sex with Sullivan is going to kill me. I'm actually going to die from embarrassment."

"You heard the man, Cameron. Just lick and suckle," he replied grinning. "Even you can manage that - you're a big bad Marine, remember?"

Cam was just trying to process that when any follow-up he might have managed was cut off when someone dropped into the seat beside him, tray clanging loudly as it was slammed into the table with a little too much force.

'This looks cozy,' Lambert groused. Cam still saw him around every now and then, less now Maitra wasn't actively corralling them, but the blond still popped up sporadically...mostly at inopportune times.

'Hi, Lambert,' Cam spluttered.

Sebastian's smirk turned lethal. 'Real cozy. Was just giving Cam here some pointers on how to blow your boy.'

After that - everything happened at once.
Lambert turned an impressive shade of red and choked on his food while Cam made a noise he would probably relive with horrible clarity for years.

'*Sebastian*!' Cam yelped, half-rising; eyes wide, hands flailing as his blood pounded in his ears. 'He's just kidding - we were - we were -,'

'Sit,' Sebastian ordered, hooking his foot around Cam's ankle and inelegantly pulling him back down onto his chair. 'He *knows* - stop making a scene.'

Cam went still. 'What are you...?' His gaze slid to Lambert, who gave a stiff, awkward nod, looking plainly uncomfortable.

'He told you?' Cam asked. 'He told you - with actual *words*?'

Lambert shook his head. 'That's… not how Sully operates. I put two and two together and confronted him about it in a way he couldn't deny. You know - the *usual*.'

Cam huffed out a quiet breath. 'That...sounds more like him.'

Sebastian made a face, but mercifully didn't press. Instead he turned to Lambert. 'You promised to keep an eye on him, didn't you?'

'Regretting it now,' Lambert muttered.

'Good,' Sebastian said, a little too pleased with himself. He leaned back, all easy confidence. 'Then listen up, *Leatherneck*. I'm not trying to steal your boy's boyfriend. Did I poke Sullivan a bit? Yeah. Man makes it real easy. But Cam and I?' He tipped his chin toward Cam. 'Friends. That's it. So you can holster whatever territorial nonsense you were gearing up to deploy.'

For a moment, Lambert just looked at him; eyes narrowed, face blank in that way that made Cam brace for impact. But then he just gave a short nod.

'Yeah. I get that,' Lambert said. 'I pull the same shit with Robby. Guy's jealous as hell - fucking funny as shit.'

Sebastian's mouth twitched. 'Figures.'

Cam let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

'Truce?' Lambert offered up.

Sebastian winked at him, causing Lambert to make a face. 'Truce. But only if you tell your Sullivan I said *hi* - and that he owes me a drink.'

Lambert snorted. 'You're lucky he's not here.'

Sebastian grinned. 'Nah - made him go red plenty of times. Was more fun watching you squirm. Bit out of your comfort zone, little lamb?'

Cam groaned, burying his face in his hands. Why. Why did Sebastian get such a kick out of needling people?

'Don't call me that,' Lambert said, focused on his food. 'But...yeah. My dad's a preacher. Fire and brimstone type.' He shrugged, small and stiff. 'You grow up hearing the same things long enough, they stick. Even when you know better.'

There was a pause: not an invitation, just space.

Sebastian's grin faded, something quieter taking its place. 'Yeah,' he said. 'I feel you.'

'It's not-,' Lambert started, then stopped himself. He shook his head once. 'Anyway. Doesn't matter.'

Cam looked at him. 'Still,' he said carefully, 'it's good to know Sullivan's got people like you watching his back.'

Lambert gave Cam a brief, almost awkward nod - not approval, exactly, but acceptance. 'Someone's gotta.' He cleared his throat and picked up his fork again. 'Let's hope the idiot gets that this time around, huh?'

Cam's rotation date had been pushed back - only by two days, which made him lucky by any objective standard, even if it didn't feel that way.

But today was officially the day. Cam, along with most of the guys he'd rotated in with, were flying back to the States.

The departure hall was noisy, the boisterous knot of Marines making it feel far more crowded than it actually was, their voices ricocheting off bare concrete walls and high ceilings.

Cam lay flat on the cold floor of the hall, his duffel shoved under his head like a makeshift pillow, staring up at stained ceiling tiles - waiting for the boarding call as the fluorescent lights hummed faintly above him.

Slovacek sat next to him, sprawled out like he owned the place: legs spread wide, arms lose at his side. They were rotating out together, but while Cam was anxious to get going, Slovacek looked faintly green; flying always did that to him, and the looming promise of an uncomfortable C-17 transport wasn't helping.

Ray sat across from them, cross-legged, a spectator to their exit since his own rotation date was still a month out. 'You could at least pretend you're excited to go home,' he said.

'Shut up, you shmuck,' Slovacek muttered, knee bouncing, jaw tight.

'What Nicky's trying to say,' Cam said mildly, not bothering to look at either of them, 'is that we're thrilled to leave camp and deeply unthrilled about transit.'

A half-hearted elbow dug into his ribs.

'Watch it, Cope,' Slovacek warned, pointing at his face. 'You're on thin enough ice as is. Can't fucking believe you're going off to play house with that psycho Sullivan of all people. You should've said something! I'd've found you someone less fucked in the head to stick your dick in.'

Cam groaned and buried his face in his hands.

'Thank you,' Ray said, pointing triumphantly at Slovacek. 'See? It's not just me.'

'Of course it's fucking not,' Slovacek said. 'Sullivan was the worst bastard, full stop. And the weirdo especially loved tormenting Cope.'

'Please stop talking,' Cam pleaded, voice muffled. Then he peeked through his fingers and shot Ray a look. 'Also, I distinctly remember you telling me not to stay with Slovacek because, and I quote; he was going to kill me in my sleep.'

Ray winced. Slovacek laughed, loud and unashamed. 'Like I'd wait for you to sleep,' he said, grinning. 'I've got thirty-five pounds of muscle on both of you twinks.'

'Hey,' Ray protested. 'I'm not a -,'

'You are,' Cam cut in, amused. 'And it's one of the nicest things he says, so I'd just take it.-

Ray scowled, then let it go. 'All I'm saying is; just because Slovacek turned out okay by some miracle doesn't mean Sullivan will. I get the… connection stuff.'

'Connection stuff,' Slovacek echoed, snorting.

Ray shot him a glare. 'And wanting to hang out with him. But you're basically moving in with a guy we're not convinced is fully right in the head.'

'I can safely say none of us is fully right in the head,' Cam said dryly. 'And I'm not moving in with him. I'm visiting.'

'For an undisclosed amount of time.'

'Leave is definite. Even if the visit lasts for my entire leave, I'm still moving into the barracks after - I'm not moving in with him.'

Which reminds me,' Ray said narrowing his eyes, 'have you told him?'

Of course he had to bring that up.

'I'm calling him once we're stateside.'

'To tell him you've been assigned to Camp Lejeune?'

Cam exhaled. 'I figured I'd hold onto that information a little longer.'

'Cam,' Ray said sharply.

Slovacek shook his head. 'Way to convince us you don't think he's bat-shit, Cope. You're scared to tell him you'll be sharing a home base.'

'I'm not afraid of him.'

'No,' Ray said. 'You're afraid he'll run when he realises you're not going anywhere.'

The words landed clean. Accurate.
And uncomfortable...

Cam sat up, the cold seeping through his fatigues, and let the truth of it settle; it wasn't fear of Sullivan that twisted in his chest, it was the opposite. 'He's not a bad person-,'

'That's up for debate,' Slovacek muttered.

Cam ignored him. 'You need to remember: one, he's *recon*, which is a whole different level of pressure. Two, he spent years alone, hiding who he was from everyone. Do you have any idea how *exhausting* that is?'

'It's not an excuse,' Ray said.

'No,' Cam agreed. 'But like I've told you before:
it is an explanation.' He paused, then added more quietly, 'And I can take care of myself. You know that.'

Ray's shoulders sagged. 'I know you can. But you're still my friend. And Sullivan's…'

'A fucking psycho?' Slovacek offered.

Ray hesitated. 'Well. Yeah. Kind of.'

'He's not,' Cam said, then softened. 'He's human. He's… actually nice. He just sucks at showing it.' He flicked a look at Slovacek. '*Sound familiar*?'

'I am not half as nuts as Sullivan.'

'You tried to choke me.'

'You dumped a bucket of piss on me.'

'Because you were being a unbearable.'

'Juvie taught me you establish dominance or get picked on.'

'It was bootcamp, not juvie.'

'Same difference.'

Ray studied Slovacek like a problem he hadn't decided whether to solve or not. 'I still don't know if I should be surprised you're thriving in the Corps.'

Slovacek grinned, crooked and unapologetic. He nudged Cam's boot with his own. 'Point is: we're good now. We're stationed together. And if Sullivan goes full bootcamp Sullivan?' His grin thinned, just a touch. 'I've got your back. Like McAffey did at bootcamp.'

Ray huffed a laugh. 'You'll probably be better at it. Sullivan intimidated me into ditching Cam.'

The wound had long scabbed over for Cam, but Ray never quite managed to forgive himself for that particular moment of weakness.

Slovacek waved it off with practiced ease. 'He was probably just jealous as fuck of you. Ginger prick's been eyeing Cope since day one.'

'Nicholas,' Cam snapped, face heating.

'*Don't* call me *that*,' Slovacek said. 'And don't clutch your pearls. I saw half that club drooling over you. You've got curb appeal or some shit.' Slovacek tilted his head, studying Cam for a second longer than usual. The noise of the hall seemed to recede, like someone had turned the volume knob down a notch. 'Look,' he said, voice lower now, stripped of its usual swagger. 'My point is: you've got options.' He nudged Cam's boot again, not playful this time. 'If Sullivan goes sideways? There's no reason to martyr yourself over it.'

The word martyr stuck. Cam had worn that shape before, and hearing it named, casually and without accusation, felt like someone pressing a finger to an old bruise. 'I wouldn't -,'

'I know,' Slovacek cut in, immediately. 'That's my point. You're not built like that.' He shrugged, like it was obvious. 'You'll take space. You'll walk. Hell, I know you'd leave his ass if you really had to.'

Cam felt something loosen in his chest at that; the strange, quiet relief of being seen clearly. Not as pathetic. Not as soft. Just… capable.

Ray glanced between them. 'Cam's loyal-,'

'But not an idiot,' Slovacek said. 'Cope's got better instincts than people give him credit for. Obsession or not.'

The word obsession still pricked, but Cam let it slide. He knew what it looked like from the outside: the way Sullivan had gotten under his skin, the gravity of it. What Ray and Slovacek never quite saw was how carefully Cam held it, how aware he was of the edge.

He sat up a little straighter: 'I promise that if it ever stops being right,' he said, steady and deliberate, 'I leave. No drama. No loyalty bullshit.' Saying it out loud felt like setting a boundary not just for them, but for himself.

Ray searched his face for a long moment, then nodded. 'That's all I needed to hear.'

Slovacek smirked, the familiar mask sliding back into place. 'See? Kid's got a weirdly good sense of self-preservation for someone this stupid.'

Cam smiled despite himself.

The boarding call echoed through the hall. Ray stood and pulled Cam up with him into a quick, awkward hug. Cam hugged him back harder than he meant to, just for a second, before stepping away.

'Safe trip,' Ray said. 'Write me, okay?'

'I always do,' Cam said. 'You come back in one piece, yeah?'

Beside him, Slovacek had already grabbed Cam's duffel and shoved it into his chest. The weight of it grounding him.

'Come on, Romeo,' Slovacek said. 'Let's get you home. McAffey - don't play with fireworks again, you hear?'

'Real funny, *Polak*,' Ray said, almost fondly. 'I'll see you Stateside?'

'Count on it, brother.'

Slovacek nudged Cam forward, steering him toward the line. His hand landed on Cam's shoulder; firm, brief. No hesitation. No theatrics. Just pressure.

It said: I meant what I said. I'm here.

Cam didn't look back, but he felt it all the way through his chest as the hand fell away.

It had taken him twelve days. A couple of debriefs. A few days with the Slovacek siblings. And now - *finally* - Cam had made it to Jacksonville, North Carolina. *To Liam Robert Sullivan.*

The airport was a jumble of sounds and smells: bitter coffee, damp

concrete, the low, constant murmur of too many people packed too close together. Baggage claim had been stuffy, the air clinging to his skin, but the sliding doors ahead promised evening cold, sharp, clean, real.

Cam tightened his grip on his duffel, slung over one shoulder. The familiar weight grounded him.

Just a few more steps and he would be outside.
Outside, where Liam had promised to wait.

The cold hit first, biting through his jacket and sinking into his bones. But it wasn't the temperature that made him shiver. Something else tightened in his chest; sharp, electric, entirely its own thing.

Liam stood off to the side of the building, back against the brick, hands tucked casually into the pockets of his jeans. Relaxed in a way Cam had rarely seen him allow. No uniform. No rank stitched to his chest. Just an old Recon hoodie, worn thin at the cuffs, jeans, boots...*soft*.

Cam blinked, taking him in.

Liam Sullivan out of uniform, ordinary enough to disappear into a crowd. To anyone else, he was just another guy waiting. To Cam, he was exactly who he'd come here for.

Liam looked up, and the sharp focus Cam knew so well eased into something quieter. A smile, small and real.

Something in Cam's chest loosened, and he crossed the distance quickly, heart thudding.

'Hey,' he said.

"Hey?" His inner voice scoffed immediately. "That's it? Weeks of longing and you lead with hey?"

"Shut up."

They stood there for a beat; close enough to brush shoulders, neither of them quite stepping in.

'Hey, Cam,' Liam said, nodding once. 'You good?'

Cam considered it. Let his eyes linger; the upturned line of Liam's mouth, the faint shadow of stubble. He looked...happy, relaxed.

"What about ridiculously hot?"

"That too. Definitely."

'I am,' Cam said finally, smiling as his fingers fidgeted against the strap of his duffel. 'Mostly just… glad to be here.'

'I'm glad you're here too,' Liam replied quietly.
Then he reached out, fingers curling around Cam's shoulder, drawing him in.

Cam didn't hesitate. He leaned into it, shoulder brushing Liam's chest as they fell into a brief, solid embrace. Not dramatic. Not anything that would draw a second glance. To anyone watching, it was just two guys greeting each other. Friends. Comrades. But Cam felt it for what it was: Liam letting him in. No armor. No pressure. Just them.

'So,' Cam said as Liam's hand lingered a second longer than necessary before dropping away, 'what now?'

"Could you sound any more eager?"

"Shut. Up."

Liam tilted his head, the corner of his mouth lifting. 'Now I take you home. Just us.'

Cam's chest tightened. 'Sounds good to me.'

Liam's car was immaculate; just as pristine as Cam had expected. He hovered a second, suddenly very aware of his boots and his clumsy military-issued duffel.

Liam noticed. 'Here,' he said easily, taking the duffel and tossing it into the trunk.

Cam slid into the passenger seat carefully. It smelled faintly of cigarettes, but mostly of Liam's cologne. Clean, familiar. And his shoulders sagged as the seat cradled him.

He cleared his throat. 'Nice car.'

'Thanks.' Liam slid behind the wheel with infuriating ease for someone his size. 'I like working on cars. When I'm off duty.'

Cam filed that away. 'So it's just military tech you wreck?'

Liam huffed a laugh. 'That stuff's all high-tech. This thing's twenty years old. Doesn't get more low-tech than that.'

Traffic lights blurred past. Liam hummed quietly with the radio. Cam watched him without trying not to for once, appreciative of the broad set of his shoulders, the easy way his hands moved, the city lights catching the blue in his eyes.

They stopped at a sign. Liam glanced over, caught Cam staring, and smiled. 'You hungry?' he asked. 'Tina said she'd drop off some food. Heat and eat.'

'Oh God, yes,' Cam said fervently. 'I love Ana, but Czech food is… *aggressive*. I was raised on microwave dinners - I can't handle those amounts of cream and meat.'

'Hate to break it to you,' Liam said dryly, 'but Tina isn't happy unless everyone's got indigestion.'

'Is death by food a thing?'

'You could stand a couple extra pounds.'

Cam shot him a look. 'That's rich, coming from the most cut man alive.'

'Been looking, Cam?'

Cam snorted. 'You know I have,' he said honestly.

'Me too,' Liam said quietly.

When they pulled up outside the building, Cam lingered a moment, hands on his seat belt, taking in the building. 'You live above a hair salon?' Cam asked. 'A very pastel hair salon?'

'Yeah.' Liam killed the engine. 'Place was too big for just me. Tina rents the storefront. It's… nice having her around.'

A cold breeze rattled the last leaves on the trees. Cam shivered. Liam's hand found his back, guiding him inside. 'C'mon. Don't freeze.'

The apartment was warm. Cozy. Not the barracks style interior Cam had half-expected. There was color on the walls, throw pillows and a frankly surprising amount of candles.

'It's really nice,' Cam said, shrugging out of his jacket and hanging it

over a chair.

'You sound surprised.'

'I was expecting metal and camouflage. So, I'm happy to be proven wrong,' Cam said softly. 'And that you have somewhere like this.'

Something shifted in Liam's expression; soft and gentle. The same look that had first caught Cam's attention years ago on a firing range.

'I'll heat the food,' Liam said. 'Shower if you want. I left a towel out for you.'

'Yes,' Cam said immediately. 'Please.'

The bathroom filled with steam. Hot water sluicing away travel and tension.

"Exactly how clean are you planning on getting?" His inner-self questioned, eyes big and hopeful.

"Normal clean," Cam muttered. "We haven't even kissed yet."

"So you're finally alone - like he always said you needed to be. And you're what? Just going to stare longingly at him?" He threw up his hands dramatically. "That's it. You are going to die a backdoor-virgin. It's hopeless. I give up."

"We have time. And remember how Sebastian said to work up to it?"

"We've been working up to it for years!"

Cam dressed: soft grey sweatpants and a navy t-shirt he finally managed go fill out.

"If that's what you're wearing - I'm just going to mark tonight as hopeless," his inner-self said disdainfully.

"There's nothing wrong with my clothes, thank you," Cam snapped. "Besides Ana said these made my ass look great."

"You know what makes your ass look great? Your boxers."

Cam ignored him.

"At least lose the shirt."

“It's December," Cam hissed. "This is fine."

He stepped back into the living room and froze.
Liam’s eyes were on him. Unapologetic. Slow. Cam froze for just a second - as if he was still a recruit that needed to pass his inspection. And he saw Liam’s approval, plain as day.

'Food’s ready,' Liam said evenly, and he nodded at the couch. 'Sit.'

They settled on the couch, plates balanced on their laps. There were candles burning, and the soft flickering cast gentle shadows, warming the room in a way nothing else could.

'Movie first or conversation?' Liam asked, tilting his head slightly.

'Movie,' Cam answered. 'Something simple. No big thinking.'

Their shoulders touched and their knees brushed as they ate side by side. The city humming faintly outside, traffic murmuring beyond the window. Cam caught himself laughing at one of Liam’s comments about magically reloading guns, and felt the easy warmth of sitting next to someone who knew him.

And when their plates were empty, abandoned on the coffee table, Cam pulled together every sliver of courage he had, and moved, slowly, giving Liam every chance to move away as he shifted, leaning his shoulder against Liam chest. But he didn’t move away, instead he let Cam settle against him only to then wrap his arm around him, strong and warm, pulling him closer until Cam was practically sprawled on top of him.

'This is nice,' Cam murmured.

Liam just hummed as Cam’s fingers found the hem of his hoodie. Not pulling. Just there. *Testing*. Liam glanced down and covered Cam’s hand with his own. 'It's fine,' he murmured. 'No one to walk in on us here.'

Cam nodded, swallowing. 'I know. Just making sure it's okay.'

They didn’t kiss right away. And when it did happen, it was quiet: Cam turning his head, Liam meeting him halfway. Soft at first.

Exploratory. One hand cupping Liam's jaw, thumb brushing along his cheekbone. Liam melted into the touch and made a small sound that Cam felt everywhere. Nothing was rushed, not even when Liam shifted so Cam's legs were tucked between his own, Cam straddling one thigh more than sitting on it.

The contact deliberate but restrained.

Liam's hand slipped onto Cam's lower back then, beneath his shirt, skin on skin, warm and steady, but never slipping lower than that.The touch made Cam braver, and he let his hands slide up Liam's ribs, over his shoulders, fingers tracing muscle like he was learning the shape of him by touch. And then, when Cam pressed even closer, he felt it: the heat, the want - but still Liam didn't move his hips. Didn't chase friction. Instead, he just kissed Cam slower.

Cam broke away with a breathless laugh, forehead dropping to Liam's shoulder. 'You're doing that on purpose.'

'Doing what?'

'The slow thing,' Cam tilted his head back to look at him.

Liam nodded. 'We have time.' And he pressed a kiss to Cam's temple, then his cheek, then the corner of his mouth; small, grounding touches. Cam relaxed into him again, body warm and pliant.

They stayed there as the movie played on, half-ignored; Cam's head tucked under Liam's chin, Liam's hand tracing slow patterns on Cam's back. When Cam shifted, restless but content, Liam murmured: 'You good?'

'Yeah,' Cam said softly. 'Just comfortable....and tired.'

Liam tightened his arm around him just a fraction. 'Bed?'

'Probably,' Cam muttered, reluctantly disentangling himself from the warm embrace.

'I'll clean up here, you get ready for bed,' Liam said already stacking the plates. 'You look dead on your feet.'

Cam hesitated, then nodded. He didn't trust his voice not to give him away anyway. He got ready quickly and perfunctorily - all military routine, before slipping into the bedroom; it was dimly lit, just a small bedside lamp and a spill of streetlight through the curtains. Cosy.

Warm.

Cam stripped down to his boxers without thinking too hard about it and he was still folding his clothes, hands a little clumsy, when Liam froze in the doorway, one hand on the frame as he looked at Cam - *really looked*. His gaze traveled slowly; not greedy, not clinical, just thorough. Appreciative. Honest. Just like it had been that day in the shower, only this time, he didn't stop...and his eyes travelled down to where Cam’s boxers sat low on his hips.

Cam felt himself twitch under the intensity of the stare. He swallowed. 'This okay?'

Liam’s answer came immediately. 'Yeah.' One step into the room. Then another. 'Better than okay honestly,' he added, with a quiet snort, before reaching for the hem of his hoodie. Liam pulled it off slowly, folding it without hurry and setting it aside. Then his t-shirt followed revealing pale skin and lean muscle, scars catching the low light. 'You can lie down, you know?'

Cam nodded sheepishly: his mouth dry and his breath stuck somewhere halfway to his lungs.

Liam sat on the edge of the bed to take of his jeans and socks, close enough that Cam could feel the warmth of him, the shift of the mattress.
And before Cam quite knew what he was doing, he turned to his side, hand travelling up and down Liam's spine.

Liam froze for a second, before melting into the touch. He settled beside him then, facing Cam as the blanket pooled around both of them. No words. No expectation. Just quiet, human closeness. The kind of intimacy built from trust, comfort, and familiarity. There were small touches: a hand grazing an arm while adjusting the blanket, knees nudging as they shifted, Liam's fingers brushing Cam's neck when he reached out to flick off the lights, and finally Liam’s arm sliding around Cam's waist, solid and warm as they kissed goodnight

And that was enough.

At least for now.

Chapter 21: Chapter twenty-one

Chapter Notes

> Happy 2026 everyone! Wishing you all good health and a safe place to live!
>
> Just a heads-up: I don't take the characters in My Own Private Idaho are choosing to be miserable - just stepping into the head of a straight early 90s Marine.
>
> Also - we're entering the endgame here, I´m thinking of finishing off the story at 25 chapters. I just feel like 25 would be a nice number, and four more chapters should be enough to do everything I wanted to do :-)
>
> And...things might actually kind of go somewhere in this chapter. So if you're not into that - skip the final bit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liam had survived *worse* than this.

Or at least that's what he told himself as he walked Cam toward the bar - had told himself the same thing in the car, in the parking lot, and halfway down the sidewalk.

He'd walked into gunfire. He'd walked into rooms where everyone already hated him. Going out for a drink shouldn't have rattled him. But he'd honestly prefer a recon mission behind enemy lines over...*whatever the hell this was*. Which only made it worse, because nothing bad was actually happening: it was just drinks, drinks with Rob and Tina - two people who knew him, *who knew of him*, and loved him anyway.

The bar was already loud - some band playing on stage - but the lights warm and low. It was the kind of joint made for nights out, and the floor always felt faintly sticky because of the dancefloor in front of the small stage. Liam preferred his bars quiet, but Tina liked it here, so Liam sucked it up and pretended to like it too.

Liam was halfway through reminding himself to breathe - slow, even - when someone squealed his name.

'Sully!'

He saw Rob first: at a table by the bar, long legs stretched out, one arm draped over the back of his wife's chair like he owned the place. He barely bad time to brace before Tina was on them, all sparkle and and momentum, hands landing on Cam's arms like she was checking he was real.

'Oh my *God*,' she said, her smile bright. 'You're real! I was half-convinced Robby made you up.'

Cam blinked once: surprised, but not overwhelmed, then he smiled.

'Hi,' he said easily. 'I'm Cam.'

'I know,' Tina said briskly. 'Sully's been weird about you for weeks. C'mon - sit! I can't believe you're finally here.'

Liam winced. 'Tina-,'

'Oh hush,' she waved him off without looking at him. 'If I wasn't excited, then you had reason to be worried.'

Cam laughed, soft and surprised, and let himself be guided toward the table without resistance.

That… helped. More than it should have.

Rob stood to greet them, all loose confidence and easy warmth, clapping Cam on the shoulder and pulling him into a bearhug like it was the most natural thing in the world. 'Good to see you again, Cope,' he said.

'Happy to be here,' he said with a crooked grin.

'And we're happy to have you,' Tina assured him, already flagging down a waitress.

Rob hugged Liam too. 'She'll calm down in a minute or two, don't worry,' he muttered slapping Liam's back with a crooked grin.

Liam took his seat last, pulse still running too fast despite Rob's words. He kept an eye on Cam for any signs of discomfort. But there was no stiffness, no nervous twitching, or performance, just…*Cameron Cope.*

The waitress arrived with a pad and a practiced smile. 'Okay, what are we drinking tonight?'

Tina didn't hesitate. 'Red wine. Whatever's decent and not ten dollars

a glass.'

Rob snorted. 'She means cheap.'

'I mean drinkable,' Tina shot back.

The waitress looked at Cam. 'You?'

'Beer's good,' Cam said. 'Whatever's on tap.'

She turned to Liam. And he hesitated just long enough for Rob to notice.

'Bud Lite,' Liam said finally.

Rob's brow flicked up, just a fraction, then he nodded once, like he'd logged it and moved on. 'Same for me,' he added easily. 'Gotta drive.'

The waitress left, and conversation slid back into place like nothing had happened.

'So,' Tina said, turning fully toward Cam now, elbows on the table. 'You're in the neighborhood now, huh?'

'Since yesterday,' Cam said. 'So still figuring it out.'

'You never been stationed here?'

Cam cleared his throat. 'Nope. First time.'

'You like it, here?' Rob asked.

Cam shrugged, smiling. 'Yeah. It's… normal. Which I didn't know I'd miss.'

Liam felt that one land low in his chest.

'Normal's overrated,'Tina said briskly. 'But it's good for the soul. Sully take you to the bakery on the corner of the street yet? They sell cookies the size of your head.'

'If she's not at Sully's when I go to pick her up at closing time, she's usually over at Maria's eating leftovers.'

'You have to give away all my secrets like that?' Tina laughed.

'Your salon looks impressive,' Cam complimented.

'Thank you,' Tina said proudly. 'Robby and Sully fixed it up for me. It did end up looking pretty great, didn't it?'

Cam's eyebrows lifted. 'They fixed it up? Even the paint job?'

'*Even* the paint job,' Tina cackled.

Liam shared a commiserating look with Rob, both of them remembering two long days spent covered in pastel.

Cam's mouth twitched.

'Don't you dare laugh, Cope,' Liam warned, grinning.

'I'm sorry,' Cam said, already chuckling. 'I'm just trying to picture you all… *pastel*. It is impressive, though. I mean - these are the two guys who completely destroy perfectly good equipment. Didn't see the handyman thing coming.'

'To be fair I do most of the messing up,' Rob said. 'And Bobby's the handy one; I just hold stuff and hand him things.'

'And didn't die,' Liam said. 'That's impressive for you.'

Rob glanced at Liam, smirking. 'Especially since I was working with Mr. Temper Tantrum himself.'

The waitress returned, set down their drinks.

'You know they did up Bobby's place too?' Tina questioned.

Cam's eyes turned to him, bluer than blue under the bar lights, looking at him with a type of amazement that brought Liam straight back to Parris Island. He wrapped his fingers around the cold glass of the bottle - grounding, brief relief.

'You said you worked on cars,' Cam said. 'But your apartment? That's probably even more impressive.'

'It's just drywall and IKEA - nothing impressive about it,' Liam said dismissively.

Tina kicked him under the table. Hard enough to hurt. 'We are trying to brag about you,' she said flatly. 'Will you stop selling yourself short? Jesus, Bobby.'

Liam smiled. Even laughed - but it came a beat late.

The room felt louder now. Warmer. Closer.

The conversation rolled on anyway. Tina talked about the block, about the weird neighbor who watered the sidewalk like it might grow. Rob chimed in. Cam followed easily: adding comments, asking questions.

It was effortless. *Too* effortless.

Cam fit. At the table, and right next to Liam: brushing their knees, leaning in under the guise of listening to Rob. Taking up Liam's space without shrinking, without checking the room.

And somewhere between stories, without really noticing, they were on their second round - and Liam had polished off another beer without even tasting it.

He honestly hadn't even really noticed until he felt eyes on him: Rob, his mouth a disapproving line. He didn't say anything at first just leaned back, chair tipping onto two legs, gaze drifting past Liam toward the dance floor where the band was starting up again.

Tina clapped once. 'Oh! This is my song.' She was already on her feet, fingers closing around Cam's wrist. 'C'mon, handsome. You look like you owe me a dance.'

Cam blinked, surprised, then laughed. 'I don't-,'

'You can and you will,' Tina declared, dragging him away before he could finish the sentence.

Cam shot Liam a quick look over his shoulder: brow furrowed but amused.

Liam smiled. 'Just go.'

Rob shifted closer then, forearms resting on the table. 'You're spiraling,' he said mildly.

Liam snorted. 'I'm fine.'

Rob snorted. 'Yeah, you're not. It's going great,' he went on. 'Which is probably what's freaking you out.'

Liam didn't answer. Didn't have to. Rob followed his gaze to the dance floor. Cam was laughing, loud and unguarded, letting Tina spin him without worrying how he looked, as his gaze darted to the

condensation on Cam's untouched beer.

Rob tapped the table once. 'Don’t.'

Liam glanced at him.

'Touch that beer and I break those fingers,' Rob said, not looking at him. 'Two’s your limit. We're not going down that road again.'

Liam huffed, chafing under Rob's scrutiny, as he flexed his fingers nervously. 'I’m out with a guy - *on a date*.'

'Congratulations,' Rob said dryly. 'You want a banner or something?'

Liam shook his head, jaw set. 'You know what I mean.'

'I do,' Rob said easily. “And I also know you’re sitting, you're breathing, you're not drunk, and nobody's bleeding. So I'd say it's going okay.' He flagged the waitress down and ordered two sodas.

'That's not-,'

'No one’s looking,' Rob went on, cutting in easily. 'And even if they were, they’d be too busy minding their own shit to notice shit. Besides, he looks happy.' He tipped his chin toward the dance floor. 'That not help?'

Liam followed his gaze. Cam was laughing with Tina, spun half-dizzy, cheeks flushed.

It didn’t help. That was the problem.

'I shouldn’t be doing this,' Liam muttered.

Rob hummed, considering that. 'Yeah,' he said finally. 'Maybe not.'

Liam shot him a look. 'Real supportive.'

Rob shrugged. 'I’m not here to make you comfortable. I’m here to make sure you don’t lie to yourself. And if you're so hung up on your shit, you can't even enjoy a night out with someone you actually like. Hell, maybe you really shouldn't be doing this.'

They waitress dropped off their drinks.

Fuck Rob and his personal fucking growth. 'An actual fucking drink might help me calm the fuck down,' he muttered more to himself than

to Rob. 'Because I fucking am enjoying this. Problem is I don't deserve it. Not after -,'

Rob leaned forward, elbows on his knees. His voice stayed calm.'You don't get to rewrite the past tonight,' he said. 'And you don't get to drink it away either.'

Liam's jaw clenched. 'But *Aaron* -,'

Rob lifted a hand: not harsh, just final 'Not doing that here.' He let the words settle. 'If you want to screw this up, you can. Just don't use Guam as your excuse.'

Liam exhaled sharply, but kept his mouth shut and took a sip of his too-sweet soda. Rob was right. He couldn't go back. Couldn't rerun Guam; couldn't rewrite a single decision and see if it would even make a difference. What he could do was not make the same mistakes again.

Silence stretched between them. The music thumped and Rob's eyes drifted to the dancefloor. 'You know, Cam's got a lot of qualities but dancing ain't one of them.'

Liam let out a bark of surprised laughter. 'Where was he supposed to have learned, man? It's not part of the Corp's fucking curriculum.'

'I don't know - High school? He's got that thing. You know? That *River Phoenix-looking shit*. Tina clocked it immediately.'

Liam blinked. 'How the *hell* do you know who River Phoenix is?'

Rob tipped his head back. 'Tina made me sit through *My Own Private Idaho.'*

He let out an incredulous laugh. 'You - Rob Maitra - watched that?'

'You should've seen the look on the face of the kid working the Blockbusters counter when I checked it out. Should've known something was up from that alone,' Rob said with a wry chuckle. 'Anyway, didn't get half of it. Though the narcolepsy thing was fake - actually reminded me of that one kid you told me about - *the sleepwalker*?'

'Jones,' Liam said with a nod, his gut turning uncomfortably. 'Wasn't faking it apparently - Cam told me it was the real thing.'

Rob made a surprised face. 'No shit, didn't see that coming.'

'Same here,' Liam said tipping his soda bottle at him as he tried to wash away the sour taste every mention of Jones left in his mouth.

'But,' Rob went on, 'the movie did kind of feel familiar you know. And not just the gay part.'

Liam glanced at him.

'It was mostly guys choosing all kinds of ways to be miserable,' he gave him a pointed look. '*Felt familiar*.'

That landed harder than it should have, and part of him wondered exactly when Rob's verbal punches had started packing the same weight as his physical ones.

Rob went on, casual again. 'Chose right, man. He just...fits, you know?'

Liam took a deep breath. 'I know,' he said quietly.

Rob cleared his throat. 'You still good to look after Bubbles for the rest of the week?'

'Of course man,' Liam said, rolling with the sudden change of subject. 'Little surprised Tina doesn't want to take him with you to her folks.'

'I'm not driving nine hours with a dog that gets car sick, Sully,' he let out a chuckle. 'And can I just say we fucked up royally when we picked him out? Guard dog, my fucking ass.'

'Your fault - you wanted the biggest one,' Liam said, 'I told you he wasn't going to be a guard dog - knew it the moment he walked right into that fucking glass door. And then you went ahead and named him Bubbles.'

Rob grinned as he shook his head. 'Mutt never stood a chance, did he?'

'Bubbles is perfect just the way he is, Robert,' Tina said reappearing, her arm linked with Cam's both of them red-cheeked and out of breath.

'He's a wuss - but he's our wuss,' Rob agreed taking her hand and pressing a kiss to it.

Tina smiled brilliantly before her dark eyes turned to Liam. 'You're up next, Sully.'

Liam groaned.

Tina looped her arm through Liam's, bullying him to his feet before he could dodge.

'Oh no you don't,' she said brightly. 'You promised me one dance, Sully.' She dragged him to the dancefloor where she set her hands on his shoulders, guiding him into an easy rhythm as a slower song filtered through the bar. 'Relax,' she said. 'You're built like a refrigerator - but I know you've got moves.'

He snorted despite himself and followed her lead. For a moment, they just moved. Tina rested her head briefly against his shoulder, comfortable as if she'd done it a hundred times, because she probably had.

'Your boy's real cute,' she said casually, eyes flicking past Liam's shoulder. 'And I don't mean just the face - *or the bod*. He listens. That's rare.'

Liam huffed. 'That so?'

'Oh yeah,' she went on. 'Told him about our trip to see my folks. He asked follow-up questions and everything. Not even *Rob* asks me follow-up questions, Bobby.'

That made him glance over. Rob and Cam were talking; Rob was gesturing lazily with his bottle while Cam listened, brows drawn together in exaggerated concentration. Then he laughed - easy, unguarded - and leaned closer to hear whatever Rob muttered next.

Something warm and unsettling bloomed in Liam's chest. Not jealousy. Recognition.
Cam fit there. Not as his date. Not as his secret. Just… there. Talking, like this was normal life and he belonged in it.

Tina followed his gaze and smiled to herself. 'See?' she said quietly. 'You didn't drop him into a circus. You brought him home.'

Liam swallowed. 'Just feels like I'm asking too much of him, you know?'

She leaned back just enough to look up at him.
'I know you're this big bad Marine, but you're also so gosh damn sweet. Just like Robby, I think that's why the two of you love each other so much. You're actually just big old softies,' she said fondly as she squeezed his arm. 'You're not asking a damn thing, Sully. He showed up because *he wanted to*.'

The song wound down. Applause rippled half-heartedly through the room as the band called in a break.

Tina tugged him with her toward their table. 'C'mon. Let's rejoin our boys before Rob starts explaining the details of yard maintenance.'

As they reached them, Cam looked up first.

'*Hey*,' he said, soft and bright, like seeing Liam was the best part of his night.

Liam felt something inside him loosen.

'Hey,' he replied as he sat down next to him, and for the first time that night, Liam didn't scan the room for familiar faces. He just sat there, thigh pressed to Cam's beneath the table, hand resting on his knee - steady and just a little possessive - listening to Rob's story about Bubbles baggering the mailman. And he let the ordinary settle around him.

They didn't talk much on the drive back.

Cam hummed some half-remembered bit of the band's last song under his breath. Liam glanced at him now and then, and every time he did, Cam's mouth curled into a smile - like he'd noticed and decided not to comment.

The noise of the bar bled away block by block, until it was just the hum of the engine and Cam's humming. It *was...soothing*, and by the time they reached the building, Liam's shoulders had finally dropped.

Still, the apartment felt different when the door closed behind them: warmer, quieter. Liam set his keys down with more care than necessary.
Cam lingered by the door, tugging off his jacket and shoes, cheeks still flushed from the cold and the glass of wine Tina had insisted he drink. He looked loose in a way Liam didn't get to see that often: shoulders easy, smile half-formed, eyes bright with too many thoughts.

'I had a good time tonight,' Cam said lightly. 'Tina's *intens* - but in a good way?'

Liam laughed. 'That's a polite word for it.'

Cam smiled, then wandered closer, close enough that Liam could smell him: soap and cold air and something warmer underneath. He

leaned against the counter, casual, like this was nothing new. Like he hadn't spent the entire evening brushing knees under the table and glancing at Liam like he was testing the waters.

'They're a great match - though it is kind of weird to see Maitra being bossed around,' Cam said with a grin that slid into a light frown. 'You okay?'

Liam nodded automatically. Then stopped himself, fingers flexing - wanting to reach out, to touch. 'Yeah. Just… wired, I guess.'

Cam's gaze flicked up, and he stepped closer stimm; not crowding, not pressing, just present. A hand came up, hesitated, then rested lightly at Liam's wrist. Not pulling. Not asking. Waiting.

Liam felt it like a line snapping: not loud, not dramatic, just a sudden absence of resistance as Rob's voice echoed in his mind.

He turned his hand, fingers closing around Cam's without thinking. Cam's breath caught; barely audible, but Liam heard it - *felt* it.

'I liked having you with me tonight,' Liam said, voice low.

Cam smiled, that soft crooked smile of his. 'It was a great date.'

That did it.

Liam leaned in first this time. No testing. No half-step. His mouth found Cam's and stayed there: slow, deliberate, claiming time rather than space. Cam melted into it with a soft sound that went straight through him, and Liam's hand slid to his hip, firm now, holding him still, or maybe holding himself back as curious fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt, knuckles brushing skin when it shifted - leaving goosebumps in their wake.

They broke apart only because they had to breathe.

Cam rested his forehead against Liam's collarbone, laughing quietly like he couldn't quite believe himself. 'I've wanted to do that all night.'

Liam's thumb traced a slow arc at his hip. 'Yeah.'

They didn't rush. They stayed like that: heat building, bodies aligned, every movement intentional. When Liam finally shifted, guiding Cam with him instead of away, it felt inevitable rather than decided. Cam went willingly and let a wet, breathy sound against his lips when Liam

yanked him even tighter against him, so they could feel each other through their jeans. He rolled his hips slowly a few times, eyes closing and head dropping forward to mouth at Cam's neck to keep from moaning.

It wasn't wild or reckless. It was controlled, not crossing a line but gently swaying over it.

'Can we keep-?' Cam blurted out with a breathless little chuckle. 'I might cry if you stop.'

Liam let out a huff as he slowly rocked their bodies together - too far gone to consider stopping on his own accord. It had been almost three years since he'd had more than the company of his own hand, and now with Cameron Cope pressed up against him, hard and soft at the same time, he felt every day of that self-imposed celibacy thrum beneath his skin.

'Can we -,' he bit his lip trying to find the right words before settling for blunt. 'I'm too old to come in my pants - how about we hit the shower? You and me. So, I can do what I really wanted to do back in that fucking airport.'

Cam let out a breathless sound that Liam felt right down to where he was already aching, as he nodded eagerly. 'Shower sounds great,' he mumbled. 'Shower. Let's do that.'

Liam felt the corner of his mouth quirk upward as he tangled their fingers together and led Cam, eager but half-dazed into the bathroom. The air was warmer there, comfortable but his heart was just about beating out of his chest when he turned the water on, letting it heat up, suddenly very glad he'd put the effort into a tiled shower instead of a tub combo.

When he looked back, Cam was standing there: eyes half-lidded, mouth soft and wet watching him. His hands moving around idly because he never seemed to know what to do with them.

So Liam decided for him, stepping into his space, and putting those hands on the hem of his sweater. He felt Cam's fingers clench the fabric as they slowly - *heartbreakingly careful* - dragged it up Liam's torso. He leaned in then, and kissed him far too sweetly, as Liam's fingers deftly undid every button of Cam's blue shirt. Sliding it off his shoulders with lingering fingers.

'You're going to kill me - actually *kill* me,' Cam whispered against his

mouth as Liam's fingers dropped to the button of his jeans.

And honestly Liam was glad Cam was as affected as he was because the way his fingers were shaking did not bode well for his stamina.

More kisses - *open-mouthed and desperate*- were traded as they stripped each other of their pants until they were down to their underwear and socks.

Liam pulled back just enough to look as his eyes dipped down the hard planes of Cam's torso down to where his black boxers tented. He moved a hand down, a vague reflex to cover himself but Liam caught his wrist. 'You sure?' Liam asked searching out Cam's eyes. 'You're sure you want me touching you?'

Cam gaped at him. 'I'd be offended if you didn't.'

That ripped a chuckle out of Liam's throat and he bent down to get rid of his own socks and boxers: he knew what he looked like, he knew Cam liked what he looked like - and it was anticipation instead of embarrassment that made his cheeks flush. Cam followed his lead - albeit clumsier, and shyer, his eyes fixed somewhere around Liam's shoulder as he kicked his own boxers off.

Just when it looked like Cam was going to try and cover himself up, Liam pulled him in: covering his mouth with his own as he cupped Cam's jaw with one hand while the other one grabbed him low on his hip, so his fingers dug into the fleshiest part of him.

He manoeuvred the smaller man under the warm spray of water, releasing his mouth so his own lips could chase the waterdrops that landed on his neck.

Cam keened; one hand raking through Liam's hair while the other grabbed his hip as he rocked them back together.

The grind against their stomachs, the slide against each other, hot, hard and wet was damn near perfect - but now he had Cam here with him, Liam felt too hot, too greedy and he carefully wrapped his hand around both Cam and himself and stroked – lightly, slowly.

Cam's eyelids fluttered shut and he moaned low. His hands everywhere - but always pulling closer.

He could finish like this - even though the slide was awkward and still a touch too dry, but he wanted to wring more sounds out of Cam,

wanted him to stay, to want more from him. So, with one last bruising kiss - he turned Cam around so his back was to his front. And Liam couldn't stop the sound that escaped him when he slid against Cam's behind, at the almost but not quite teaser of what it would feel like to really have him.

Cam leaned back against him, hips moving encouragingly - but this wasn't about that, this was about him. Liam wrapped one hand around him, while the other played with every part of him that made him gasp.

'Liam,' he moaned as his head fell back against Liam's shoulder. They kissed like that, as they rutted against each other desperate for a release that had been more than two years in the making.

It didn't take long for Cam to spill over Liam's fist, gasping, squirming as Liam whispered a jumble of praise and encouragement in his ear - to wound up for coherency.

'You too,' Cam murmured as he tilted his hips back encouragingly. Liam's brain just about short-circuited as he settled both hands on Cam's hips, fingers splayed wide but gentle - always gentle, and he rocked himself against Cam's cleft. 'Wanted this,' he muttered, 'wanted this for a while - even better than I imagined. Fuck Cam - fuck.' He finished with a groan he didn't bother holding, spilling against Cam's behind and lower back, breathing far too hard as he pressed wet kisses to Cam's neck and shoulder, the water taking care of the mess he'd made.

Cam's breathing slowed first. He shifted slightly, then stilled again, like he'd tested the distance and decided he didn't want it after all. 'That was…' Cam started, then stopped. A quiet huff of a laugh. '*Yeah*.'

Liam smiled into his hair. 'Yeah,' he agreed as he pressed another kiss to Cam's shoulder. 'You okay?'

Cam nodded against him. 'More than okay.' A pause. 'You?'

Liam exhaled slowly. Honest. 'Yeah.' That answer surprised him a little. Not because it wasn't true; but because it felt earned. Like something he'd allowed himself instead of guarded.

Cam tilted his head just enough to look up at him. His eyes were soft, unfocused in that post-something glow. 'You didn't have to,' he said quietly.

'I know,' Liam replied. His thumb traced a small, absent-minded arc at Cam's side. 'I wanted to.'

Cam considered that, then nodded once before he smiled softly. 'Then tell me,' Cam said, 'please tell me we're doing that again. I'd die - *actually die* - if we didn't.'

Liam let out a chuckle that was all gravel, hands stroking up and down Cam's side. 'Can't have that now can we?'

After that they dried off and brushed their teeth, neither of them eager to dress after getting a taste of what skin on skin felt like, before settling into the bed.

Liam was relieved almost with how eagerly Cam sought out his embrace, body melting into Liam's as he adjust the blanket around them. Cam responded by curling closer, one knee nudging between Liam's, grounding them together. It felt instinctive. It felt right, and Liam relaxed beneath Cam's now familiar weight. It struck him how natural it felt, how *domestic...how little he wanted to pull away from it.*

The room was quiet, the city outside reduced to a distant hush, like the world had politely stepped back to give them time.

Liam stayed awake after Cam's breathing evened out. He stared at the dark, at the faint outline of the ceiling, at nothing in particular, because if he looked at Cam again, warm and trusting against him, he knew the weight in his chest would tip into something harder to manage.

This wasn't the first time he'd been here. Aaron had been first. Guam. Late nights that felt private until they weren't. He'd been a coward then, running without a goodbye, without defending the man he'd held just as close. He'd told himself it was self-preservation. Career. Survival. All the things he was trained to value.

But lying here now, with Cam's weight steady and real, the truth pressed in harder.
He'd been afraid.

And he'd left someone else to carry the consequences alone.

Tears pricked behind his eyelids as the shame caught up with him again - it always did. No longer loud enough to make him stupid, but sharp enough to shape him. To make him careful. Closed. Determined never to want something badly enough to risk it again.

Cam shifted in his sleep, fingers brushing Liam's stomach. Instinctively, Liam tightened his arm around him. *This time was different.* He hadn't run. Hadn't pulled away. Hadn't pretended it was nothing. And Robby was with him this time, eyes no longer accusing, but accepting. Liam exhaled slowly, feeling the truth settle where it belonged: staying was a choice. One he was making with his eyes open.

'I won't do that again,' he whispered to himself - not a promise, but a fact. He pressed his mouth briefly to Cam's hair, careful not to wake him, and let his eyes close at last.

For the first time, the past didn't feel like something chasing him. It felt like something he'd finally stopped running from.

Chapter End Notes

I figured someone like Sergeant Sullivan would get a real kick out of mundane intimacy - and that's probably my reason for giving this date a....happy ending ;-)

Chapter 22: Chapter twenty-two

Chapter Notes

I'm back!

Took some time off because my sister got me an ereader for Christmas and I went on a little reading binge.

But I'm back and ready to finish things off here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part of him - *like ninety, ninety-five percent of him, honestly* - had expected Liam to go full *Sullivan* on him after the first time they actually did something: hot and cold, confusing as hell - DI Sullivan.

So it was a pleasant surprise when it didn't happen. There was no emotional whiplash. No gay angst. Just… nice, slightly awkward Liam.

And more getting off.

Which, in Cameron Cope's book, was completely a-okay. Orgasms were nice. But orgasms with someone you were actually into? Those were good enough to even shut up inner-Cope for a while. Even if they had to sneak around Bubbles - the most codependent dog Cam had ever met.

Not that he'd met many dogs.
Barbara hadn't been child-friendly, let alone pet-friendly. They'd had pets, technically: a fish that hadn't made it six months; Benji's turtles, which she'd "set free" once they started stinking up his bedroom; a cat she'd handed off to a neighbour like a bad casserole after it inconvenienced her once. And honestly, with a track record like that, Cam was glad they'd never had a dog.

Ray had had one, though. A German Shepherd - *of course* - named *Chief*. Disciplined. Obedient. Regal. Just like everyone in the McCaffey household.

But Bubbles?
Bubbles was none of those things. And Cam was pretty sure Tina had personally bulldozed every boundary Rob Maitra had ever tried to set.

'Bubbles - get up,' Liam said, voice not unlike the one he used as a DI. Unlike Cam, it didn't scare the crap out of Bubbles. The dog remained stubbornly spread across the sidewalk.'You're a two-year-old dog,' Liam continued, tugging lightly on the lead, 'how the fuck are you crapping out after half a mile of jogging?'

Cam had to stifle a laugh behind his hand, earning himself a half-hearted glare. 'Recruit giving you trouble, *DI Sullivan*?' he quipped.

Liam's mouth twitched. 'Yeah. And he's unrepentant as fuck.'

Bubbles looked up at him, tail lazily slapping the pavement.

'We could carry him,' Cam offered. 'He's, what - seventy-five pounds?'

'I am not indulging this lazy ass dog,' Liam said, giving the lead another pull. 'And I'll join the fucking SEALs before I lug a Golden Retriever around like a Chihuahua.'

'So… you *would* carry a Chihuahua?' Cam asked, grinning as he stretched his leg to keep warm.
Liam grinned back; light, warm, and it did something to Cam he couldn't quite name.

'Smartass.'

Cam dug into his jacket pocket and pulled out a tiny zip-lock bag, rattling it. Bubbles' ears perked immediately.

'Bubbles?' Cam said, far too chipper for an eight-a.m. run. 'Wanna treat?' He fished out a bone-shaped biscuit and wiggled it enticingly.

Bubbles was upright in a flash.

'You had that in your pocket the entire time?' Liam asked.

Cam grinned. '*Smartass*, remember? Besides - it's funny watching you PT a dog.'

'I ought to PT *you* for that little stunt, Cope,' Liam said, eyes dancing.

And because it was early, and because it was just them, Cam shot back, 'Wait till we get back to your place and I might let you.'

Liam blinked. Once. Twice. Then he let out a hoarse chuckle, shaking his head. 'Cheeky fucker.'

It was… nice. The steel set of Liam's jaw, the iron line of his shoulders - softened. The town was full of Marines; no one blinked at two men running together. And that fact seemed to be slowly sinking in with Liam too.

"But is it sinking in fast enough?" Inner-Cam asked. "Fast enough not to freak out when you tell him you're staying?"

"He won't freak out."

"Tell me lies, tell me sweet little lies."

"He's been okay."

"Notice how you say "okay" and not "good"?"

"He has trauma."

"And you have mommy issues."

Cam's mouth dropped. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're in love with someone who runs when things get hard," inner-Cam said mildly. "Barbara Cope, but with better hair and abs."

"He is nothing like Barbara!" Cam stumbled, nearly catching himself on Liam's arm.

'You good?' Liam asked.

'Crack in the sidewalk,' Cam said sheepishly, dangling another treat for Bubbles.

'Same old Cope,' Liam said - fond.

They jogged quietly until Liam slowed without warning, hand lifting in a subtle signal Cam almost missed.

'Hey,' Liam said. 'Your breathing's shallow. In through the nose. Count it out. You tense when you're cold.'

Cam laughed under his breath. 'Of course you'd notice.'

'Habit,' Liam said. Then, softer - careful. 'Part of the job.'

Cam adjusted. Felt it immediately. 'Oh,' he said. 'That's better.'

'Told you.'

Cam hadn't even noticed that he was smiling. He shortened his stride. Let Liam set the pace. And something in him eased; not because he felt safe, exactly, but because he felt *looked after*.
That part wasn't new. The ease with which Liam did it was.

They slowed to a walk near the last stretch home, breath steaming in the cold.

'You still running mornings with Bubbles when Rob and Tina get back?' Cam asked.

Liam nodded. 'Yeah. Unless weather turns to shit. Rob gets bored when he runs alone.' A pause. 'You're welcome to keep joining. Bubbles apparently runs better with you dangling food in front of him.'

The voice in his head tried to say something - something sharp, something cautionary - but Cam ignored him. For once, he wasn't loud enough to matter, because Liam was walking beside him, breath steady, hand warm when it bumped Cam's wrist by accident and stayed there half a second longer than necessary.

This felt… good. And Liam had invited him to keep running with him. That had to count for something.

By the time they reached the building, Bubbles trotting smugly between them, Liam looked more relaxed than Cam had ever seen him outside four walls.

'Breakfast?' Liam asked.

Cam smiled. 'Yeah. Breakfast sounds good.'

He followed Liam inside, already knowing he was going to tell him. Just not yet.

Bubbles drank some water before plopping down on his dog bed, in the bedroom, because Bubbles had absolutely zero sense of personal space, and was out cold within seconds, snoring louder than even Slovacek had ever managed.

Breakfast was a routine for Liam in a way Cam had never known. Cam had grown up on cereal, with milk if he was lucky. But more often than not, breakfast had often been optional.

Liam Sullivan however, did not skip breakfast. You didn't maintain his kind of training schedule and skip breakfast. He alternated: one day oatmeal and bananas, the next scrambled eggs, toast, sausages, tomatoes. Not a single box of Captain Crunch in sight. Today was oatmeal.

'Go shower,' Cam said. 'I'll do the oatmeal.'

Liam's eyebrows shot up. 'You sure?'

Cam rolled his eyes. 'I survived seventeen years mostly unsupervised; I won't burn down your kitchen. Promise.'

And when Liam left him to it, Cam went to work. He set the table, sliced the bananas, stirred as the oatmeal came to a soft boil. It was the most domestic Cam had ever felt. And just as he took the saucepan off the heat, a hand settled at the small of his back.

'Damn recon skills,' Cam muttered as he set the pan on the trivet. The hand slid around his side, pulling him back against a firm chest. Definitely new. But not unwelcome.

'Didn't hear me?' Liam asked, smug.

'You know I didn't,' Cam said. 'In my defense, you usually sing in the shower.'

'I hurried.'

'I noticed,' Cam said, fingers idly tracing a vein in Liam's forearm. 'You're still damp. And not wearing a shirt.'

'I was warm.'

'It’s December.'

'I’ll keep warm,' Liam said easily.

Cam turned in his arms. Liam’s skin was pink from the shower, hair soft without product, no uniform, no armor. Cam kissed him, slow and unhurried, the way Liam seemed to enjoy most.

And God. It was good.
The solid warmth under his hands, the familiar taper of his waist... and before Cam quite realized it, his hand had slipped lower, palm fitting, stroking.

Liam made a sound: short, surprised — and looked down to where Cam’s hand had slipped under the grey fabric of his sweatpants.
'Breakfast?' he asked faintly.

'Can wait,' Cam said, then immediately panicked. 'Right?'

'It can wait,' Liam replied, voice rough with a laugh. He looked younger like this. Loose. Unguarded. Cam sank to his knees before he could talk himself out of it.

This was new.

Liam didn’t move. Didn’t speak.

'Uh… okay?' Cam asked, suddenly aware he might be ruining something important by overthinking it. Liam nodded once. Cam eased him free, grateful he wasn't wearing underwear and there was no extra layer to deal with.

He’d touched Liam plenty before - a lot, actually - but this felt different. Closer. More exposed.

"Of course it’s different," inner-Cope shrieked. "You're going to swallow the banana instead of hold it. There's a big difference!"

"Not helpful."

"Look, just remember what Sebastian said: a mouth is always nice, just don't try to be a hero and go full Linda Lovelace, and you'll be fine."

He leaned in. And he didn’t die, didn’t even freak out. Because Liam

tasted like soap and skin and warmth - and that was okay, that was more than okay - *it was good.* So, Cam followed the memory of Sebastian's advice and his own instinct - careful, tentative - and judged by the low curse Liam breathed out, it was working.

A hand slid into Cam's hair. Not pushing. Just there. Cam moaned - involuntary - and Liam shuddered.

That did things to Cam.
He relaxed into it, bolder now, moving with more confidence, adjusting to the stretch, the heat, the reactions he was getting.

Then Liam's hips shifted, barely, a slip in that iron control. Cam nearly lost his mind.

'Fuck - sorry,' Liam panted, cupping Cam's jaw. 'Not gonna last. Feels… real good.'

That was...unexpectedly hot. Cam's free hand drifted to himself without thinking.

Liam noticed. Swore softly. 'Pull off.'

Cam did, hand replacing mouth, copying the rhythm he knew Liam liked.

'Just like that,' Liam breathed. 'Fuck. Cameron.'

He came warm over Cam's fist. But when Cam moved to wipe it off, Liam caught his wrist and pulled him to his feet.

'No.'

Cam blinked.

'Get yourself wet for me.'

It took a second to register. Then Cam clumsily, breathlessly, wrapped the hand around himself, spreading the spend over himself before Liam's hand replaced his, firmer, knowing exactly what he liked.

Cam didn't last long.

Later, Liam smirked against his mouth. 'You should probably shower.'

'Soon as I can feel my legs again.'

The next few days passed much the same. They hung out like normal people - like a normal couple - and for the most part, Cam managed not to think about Camp Lejeune.

The dread only really crept back in on the day they were waiting for Rob and Tina to pick up Bubbles. Rob's return lined up neatly with the Liam's leave winding down - with him heading back to Camp Lejeune.

The same base Cam still had to tell him he'd be stationed at too...

It was… nerve-racking enough that Cam needed a distraction. So he finally stopped procrastinating on the one thing he'd been avoiding his entire stay: calling Barbara.

Cam leaned back against the kitchen counter, phone cord looped loosely around his fingers.

'If you're home, then why aren't you home, Cameron?' Barbara demanded. '*It's almost Christmas.'*

'I figured you guys would be busy.'

'*You're my son. I'd make time,*' she said sharply. '*Besides, Jim really wants to meet you*.'

"Newest sucker of the month wants to play catch," his inner-self purred. "Heartwarming."

"Still beats the one who thought butchering a turkey would butch me up."

"Touché."

'So you didn't tell this one I was dead?' Cam asked mildly.

'*That was one time*,' Barbara snapped. '*And I told you - it was a misunderstanding that snowballed*.'

'Not correcting people when they assume your son died does tend to

do that.'

Across the room, Liam glanced up from the football game, brow creasing. Cam lifted a hand in a quick *later*.

'I apologized,' Barbara said. '*What more do you want?'*

Cam hummed, winding the cord tighter. 'I'll make sure to stop by next time,' he lied easily.

'*Jim served in Vietnam.*'

'That's great.'

'*He has two boys - he's disappointed neither joined up. So he's excited to talk shop with you.'*

Cam winced. 'Sounds like a dream.'

'*And he really doesn't get along with Benji,'* she added. '*Having you there as a buffer would be nice.'*

'A Vietnam veteran who doesn't like Benji,' Cam muttered. 'Shocking.'

Liam snorted before he could stop himself.

'*Cameron*,' Barbara snapped - then paused. '*Where are you, anyway*?'

'At a friend's.'

'*That didn't sound like* ***Ray***.'

Of course she'd pick *now* to be perceptive.

'I never said I was at Ray's.'

A beat. Then, quieter. Calculated. '*Cameron… are you seeing someone?'*

'You know I am. I told you about Ana-,'

'*I mean* ***really*** *seeing someone*.'

Cam bit his lip. His eyes drifted to Liam without permission. 'Yeah.'

Barbara sighed, displeased. '*Cameron, you know you can't do that.*'

'Don't ask, don't tell,' Cam said under his breath. 'So don't ask. And I'm not announcing it to the world.'

'*What about him*?' she pressed. '*Does he understand how-,*'

'Yes. He does.' Cam's voice tightened.
He glanced over again. Liam hadn't reacted - but the room had gone still aside from the game playing in the background.

'*Do I get to meet him?*'

'Don't ask, don't tell,' Cam repeated. 'It's easier if we just… don't. And don't tell anyone.'

'*I'm not an idiot,*' Barbara snapped. Then, softer. '*I don't want you getting in trouble. Or hurt.*'

Cam swallowed.

The rest blurred: empty updates, vague promises, nothing he could grab onto. And when he finally hung up, he felt wrung out, like he'd run the Crucible twice.

He sank onto the couch. Liam muted the TV. 'Your mom,' Liam said carefully. 'She seems… *interesting*.'

Cam snorted. 'Told you she's a character.'

Liam nodded, like that confirmed something. He didn't pry. Just shifted closer, close enough that their knees brushed. 'You okay?'

'Yeah. I mean…' Cam shrugged. 'As okay as that ever goes.'

Liam studied him, then reached out, fingers catching lightly at Cam's sleeve. 'She really tell people you were dead?'

Cam laughed despite himself. 'Yeah. She did.'

Liam frowned. 'Because you're -?'

'No. God, no. That's actually the one thing she doesn't care about.' Cam shook his head. 'She did it to sell mascara.'

Liam stared. '*Mascara*.'

'She was in a Marine Moms group. Things escalated.'

'Things escalated,' Liam parroted, then he stood. “I feel like I need a beer for this. You want one?'

'I’m good.'

'Anything else I need to know?' Liam asked dryly.

'You know how I was actually good at swim week?'

Liam nodded over the fridge door.

'Mostly because she tended to forget to pick me up at the pool,' Cam said with a grin. And he knew he was probably too flippant about his...unorthodox childhood, and that things could've easily gone so much worse than they did, but laughing about it was...easier, more palatable than the alternative.

'Your mom forgot you at the pool?' Liam questioned staring at him, something complicated passing over his face.

'That's Barbara for you.'

Liam took a swig from his bottle of Bud Light. 'Jesus Christ,' he muttered. 'Is your name really Cameron Cope? Or did your mom mess with that too?'

Cam couldn't resist. 'It’s *Robert*, actually. Robert Cope.'

The bottle hit the table with a soft *thud,* as Liam stared at him incredulously - it was impossible for Cam to keep a straight face after that.

Liam laughed. 'You’re a little shit, Cope.'

Cam smiled, because God, he was beautiful like this: relaxed, open, soft. 'Gonna do something about it?' Cam asked before he could stop himself.

Liam shook his head, amused. 'I liked you better back when you were

scared of me.'

'No, you didn't.'

Liam walked over, leaning in, hand bracing Cam back against the couch. 'We'll talk later,' he murmured, eyes flicking briefly to Bubbles, sprawled in the armchair eyeing them lazily. 'When our audience leaves.'

'Yes, please,' Cam breathed feeling more than a little pathetic.

Rob and Tina arrived mid-afternoon, loud and apologetic after getting stuck in traffic.

'There's my boy!' Tina cried, dropping to her knees as soon as she set foot in the apartment.

Bubbles immediately defected, tail wagging so hard his whole body followed.

'Traitor,' Cam said fondly.

'Tell me about it. She sees the dog and I'm chopped liver,' Rob said, pulling Liam into a one-armed hug - then Cam. 'Good to see you, kid,' he said fondly. 'Did he give you trouble?'

'Liam or Bubbles?'

'Funny,' Liam said nudging Cam in the side. 'Bubbles was fine, snores like a freight train though.'

'He gets that from Rob,' Tina said flatly, as she finally stood and Bubbles moved on to Rob.

Liam made a face. 'Tell me something I don't know. I've been dealing with him longer than you.'

'I'm back three minutes and you're already ganging up on me? Good thing you stil love me, huh Bud?' Rob rubbed Bubbles' ears as he wagged his tail enthusiastically.

'He looks like he lost weight,' Tina said. 'How'd you manage that?'

'Cam figured out how to keep him running.'

Rob eyed Cam. 'You're hired.'

'I'll keep that in mind if this whole Marines thing doesn't work out.'

'We'll get out of your hair,' Tina said, kissing Cam's cheek, then Liam's, and shoving a gift bag into Liam's hands with a wink. 'Wine and my mom's biscotti. Figured you two could use a romantic night.'

Cam flushed.

'Subtle, T,' Rob said, clapping Liam's shoulder. 'Enjoy your last couple days. See you back on base. Cam, don't be a stranger, you hear?'

A few more quick goodbyes and promises were made before the door finally closed behind them and the apartment went quiet. A different quiet.

Liam exhaled, rolling his shoulders. 'Well,' he said. 'We're alone.' He turned to Cam, gaze dark and assessing. 'Quiet night in?'

Cam swallowed. 'Sounds good.'

Liam stepped closer, not touching, not yet, just heat radiating between them. 'I've been thinking,' he said. 'About taking things further...if you still want-,'

The restraint in it - in the *asking* - almost undid Cam. 'I do,' he said, immediately. Then softer, 'I really do.'

Liam's mouth curved, just barely. 'Good.' He reached out then, pulling Cam in. 'We'll take our time,' he added. 'No rush.'

That was it. That was Cam's opening. He needed everything out there in the open - no secrets that could come back to bite him in the ass.

'Liam,' Cam said. Liam frowned, perceptive as ever. 'Before we… get *comfortable*,' Cam continued, forcing his lungs to keep working. 'There's something I need to tell you.'

Liam stilled. Not relaxed, *locked*. His shoulders squared, jaw tightening like a reflex he didn't have to think about. 'Okay."

Cam swallowed, wiping his damp palms on his jeans. 'I got my assignment. And it's… Camp Lejeune.'

Liam stepped back. Just one step...but it might as well have been a mile. 'No.'

Cam shook his head. 'Liam-,'

'No.' Sharper now. 'That's a bad idea.'

'I didn't choose it.'

'That doesn't matter.' Liam exhaled through his nose. 'We shouldn't be doing this.'

'It's the same base, not the same unit.'

'It's still exposure.' He broke off, dragging a hand through his hair, fingers catching like they didn't quite know what to do. 'You should've told me the second you found out.'

'I'm telling you now,' Cam said, keeping his voice steady through the ache spreading across his chest.

Liam let out a short, humorless breath. 'Yeah. Now. When I'm already in it.' He paced once. Twice. His breathing went shallow, and Cam noticed, automatically, horribly, the moment DI Sullivan snapped back into place like armor. 'This can't happen.' Cam's chest tightened. 'Do you have any idea what you're asking me to risk?'

'I'm not asking you to do anything,' Cam said carefully. 'I'll just be here instead of somewhere else. That's all.'

'That's not how this works.' Liam's voice flattened. 'Proximity is risk.'

'It doesn't change anything.'

'It changes *everything*.' He stopped pacing. His breathing was shallow now. Controlled. 'I've done this before. I'm not doing it again.'

Cam went still. 'Did what?'

'*This*.' A sharp gesture between them. 'Thinking I could manage it. Thinking I could keep it quiet.'
He shook his head once, like he was correcting a bad assumption. '*Someone* always notices. *Someone* always talks. And I've already been flagged,' he added, quieter but firmer. 'If NCIS looks at me again, they won't stop.' The words weren't cruel. They were procedural. Final.

'The law's changed,' Cam said softly.

Liam scoffed. 'Policy isn't protection.' He turned away, bracing his hands on the counter. 'All it takes is one asshole with time and a grudge. I can't do this,' he said again, lower now. Not angry - resigned.

Cam swallowed. 'So what are you saying?'

Liam didn't answer right away. When he finally did, his voice was rough. 'I'm saying I need to get out of here before I say something I can't take back.' He grabbed his jacket from the chair, movements clipped, controlled to the point of strain.

'Liam-,'

Liam paused at the door, hand on the handle. He didn't turn around. 'Don't follow me,' he said. '*Please*.'

That *please,* quiet, stripped bare, hurt worse than anything else he'd said.

The door shut behind him with a soft, final click.
Cam stood there, staring at it like it might open again if he waited hard enough.

It didn't.

He was alone: in an apartment that wasn't his, in a town that didn't know him yet...

And it stung.

So he moved. He packed his duffel slowly. Not running. Not panicking. Just… removing himself. For now. Just like he promised he would. Not just for his own sake, but for Liam's too.

He packed his things with unnecessary care. Giving himself time to settle, to be okay. Socks. Underwear. He folded his shirts, pants, socks, underwear. The hoodie Liam had borrowed him came last.

He folded it, then unfolded it, then folded it again - not to pack, but to leave on the bed. Because it wasn't his to take.

And then he closed the bedroom door behind him, not daring to look back.

"You're doing the right thing," His inner-self said kindly. "You both need some space."

"Nothing about this feels right."

"Marines didn't feel right, being split up from Ray didn't feel right, being friends with Slovacek definitely didn't feel right," he said with a brittle chuckle. "But we're all right. We'll be all right again, Cam."

"He shouldn't be alone."

"You can't stay here either. Not after all of that."

"I don't know what to do."

"You do," his inner-self said nodding towards the fridge decisively. "Drop the nuke. He can take it from here."

And for a long time Cam just stood there, staring at the number taped to the fridge. It wasn't fair to call Rob, he'd only just gotten back home, he didn't need to clean up Cam's mess for him.

"You're not calling for yourself," his inner-self said aggressively tapping the note. "Call him."

He called him.

'*Hey*,' Rob answered.

'Hey,' Cam said. 'It's me. It's Cam - I mean.'

There was a brief pause on the other end. Not alarmed. Attentive. '*Everything okay?*'

Cam leaned back against the kitchen counter, phone pressed to his ear, eyes fixed on the darkened hallway. ‘Not really.’ He swallowed. Then, quieter, like saying it too loudly might make it worse: ‘He went out. I didn’t follow him.’
Silence. Rob didn’t rush to fill it, and Cam was grateful for that. ‘I… I got assigned to Lejeune,’ Cam said finally. ‘He-,’ His voice caught, just slightly. ‘He didn’t take it well.’

A slow exhale. ‘*Yeah*,’ Rob said. ‘*That tracks.’*

Cam shifted his weight, fingers tightening around the strap of the duffel slung across his shoulder. ‘Can you maybe look for him?’

‘*I know where he is*,’ Rob said. ‘*Don’t worry. I’ll get him.’*

Cam nodded even though Rob couldn’t see it, throat tight. ‘Thanks.’

‘*You gonna be there when I drag his ass back*?’

Cam shook his head before he realized the instinct, then forced himself still. ‘No. I’m not running.’ He hesitated. ‘But I think he needs space. And this-,’ His gaze flicked around the apartment, familiar and suddenly not. ‘This is his space. I don’t want him to feel like he’s stuck with me.’

Another pause, shorter this time. ‘*Copy that,’* Rob said. ‘*Mind telling me where you’re headed*?’

‘My friends,’ Cam said. Then, after a beat, ‘Or my mom. I’m not sure yet.’

‘*Okay*.’ Rob’s voice softened, but the words didn’t. ‘*Take our number with you. Call when you get wherever you’re going, okay*?’ More a demand than a question. ‘*And drop by when you get back. Whatever he said…he didn’t mean it. He’s just-*,'

‘Scared,’ Cam said quietly.

Rob let out a humorless chuckle. ‘*You know, there was a time I thought that ginger prick was afraid of nothing.’*

‘Same here.’

‘*He’ll come around*,’ Rob said, sounding like he was convincing himself as much as Cam. ‘*He always does.’*

‘See you around, Rob.’

‘*See you, Cam. Don’t forget to call, you hear?*’

‘I won’t.’

Cam ended the call and sat on the edge of the kitchen table, the duffel heavy across his back, its strap biting into his shoulder. The apartment was unfamiliarly still, every sound gone hollow without Liam in it.

For the first time since he’d arrived, he didn’t know where he stood. And worse - he didn’t know if Liam did either.

Chapter End Notes

> Sorry, but I feel that with this amount of trauma. There's always a setback before things resolve.

Chapter 23: Chapter twenty-three

Chapter Notes

> Sorry it took me a while. I'm in the end game and since the cancellation of the show, I really want to tie up all the loose ends and make sure there's some closure there.
>
> So I'm deliberately taking my time to do it right! Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liam went to the kind of bar where the bartender had stopped asking questions - the kind favoured by men who just wanted to drink and mind their own damn business.

The first beer went down too fast. The second followed without ceremony. By the third, the insistent voice in his head had made him switch to water, jaw locked, fingers curled tight around the glass like it might float away if he let go.

The bar wasn't loud, but there was noise. The constant kind. The kind that pressed in from all sides. A TV murmured somewhere overhead - football, probably - but Liam couldn't be bothered to check. His focus kept narrowing, tunnelling back to the same point no matter how many times he dragged it elsewhere: *Camp Lejeune.*

He'd been stupid to let it get this far. Stupider still to think he could manage it - *manage himself* - like this was just another thing he could compartmentalize, file away, keep tight and controlled.

He pressed his thumb into the condensation on the glass until it hurt. It didn't help. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Cam standing in his kitchen, hopeful and terrified at the same time. Like he'd already known how it was going to go and had walked into it anyway.

Liam exhaled hard through his nose and tipped the water back, draining it. He set the glass down with more force than necessary, the sound sharp against the bar.

'Another?' the bartender asked.

'No,' Liam said immediately. Then, after a beat, 'A beer.'

The bottle was cold in his hand. Familiar. Safe, in a way nothing else

felt right now. He took one swallow - then froze.

A hand landed on his shoulder; solid, unmistakable. The kind that didn't ask permission because it already knew the answer. Liam stiffened on instinct, but there was only one guy who'd walk into a Marine bar and scruff him like that.

'Easy, Sully,' Rob said, voice low, close to his ear. 'It's just me.'

Liam let out a breath but didn't look up, staring at his beer like it had offended him. And in a way it had: because Rob was sitting beside him and hadn't tried to take it away yet. That was new. And it told Liam exactly how bad things were.

'He call you?' Liam asked.

Rob hummed. 'Be grateful it was me who picked up. Otherwise you'd be dealing with T in her fluffy pink bathrobe and curlers.'

'She mad?'

Rob shrugged. 'Disappointed. Worried. *Tina*.'

Liam swallowed thickly. His tongue worried at his teeth. 'His orders are Lejeune,' he said, voice steady. 'The two of us on the same base...that's too risky, Robby.'

Rob nodded, neutral. 'And?'

'And he clearly thought it could work.' Liam's hand curled around the bottle, almost tight enough to break it. He lifted it, drank too fast, coughed once; sharp, irritated, like his body had betrayed him. '*Fuck*.' He dragged a hand down his face, scrubbed hard, palms pressing into his eyes. 'I can't do that again. I can't wake up every morning waiting for NCIS to come calling. I can't spend the rest of my fucking life waiting to see which look, which pause, which nothing rats me out.'

Rob didn't interrupt. Just motioned for a beer of his own.

Liam laughed under his breath: humourless. 'You know what the worst part was?'

Rob waited.

'I never even knew what did it last time,' Liam said. 'No warning. No fuck-up I could point to. Just-, suddenly you were telling me there was scuttlebutt. And that was fucking that.' He glanced sideways, eyes

sharp now. ‘How do I even defend myself against something like that? Against fucking rumours?'

‘You don’t,’ Rob said. ‘You weather them.’ He leaned his elbows on the bar, close enough to be felt, far enough not to crowd. ‘You get this isn’t about Cam, right? You get this is you still freaking out over Guam?’

Liam went rigid.

Rob took a sip of his beer, voice even. ‘It’s not paranoia. You've got a good reason to be...*this*. But this sure ain’t healthy either.’

Liam breathed out, slow and shaky, like he’d been holding it too long. His shoulders slumped - barely. ‘I don’t want to hurt him,’ he said. ‘That’s the thing. I don’t want to fuck him over to save my own skin. And I don’t want to be the reason he gets burned.’

‘Fair,’ Rob said.

‘And I don’t trust myself not to hurt him,’ Liam added, hollow. ‘Look at me.

Rob reached out; not to restrain, not to pull him back, just a firm hand between his shoulder blades. ‘You were a shithead to him,’ Rob said. ‘But you’ve done worse. This time you recognized you were slipping and stepped away. That’s not failure. But it’s also not a good long-term strategy, Bobby.’

Liam didn’t argue.

‘You want Cam,’ Rob said quietly. ‘That shit's as obvious as the fucking nose on your face. And he shit man, he's not asking you to burn your life down. He’s asking you to let him stand in the same room as the mess.’

Liam stared into his beer. ‘I don’t know if I know how.’

‘Then we take it slow. And you don’t do it alone.’
Rob let the silence sit, and Liam knew. He knew something was coming.

'Let me bite the bullet, Robby,' Liam said finally slapping a hand on the bar in resignation.

Rob sighed. 'Cam’s not at the apartment.'

Liam frowned. 'He at yours?'

Rob shook his head and something sank inside of him. 'He stepped out - wanted you to have space.'

That got Liam's attention. 'He-,' Liam stopped. His jaw tightened. 'Where?'

'Didn't say. Didn't make a production out of it. Just said that he'd be back.'

Liam nodded once, fingers anchoring on the bottle.

'He asked me to check on you,' Rob added.

'Of course he did.'

'He didn't leave angry.'

'That's worse.'

'Yeah,' Rob agreed.

'He didn't argue,' Liam said softly.

'No. He listened.'

Liam bent forward, elbows on the bar, head dropping. '*Fuck*.'

Rob stayed quiet.

'Cam didn't even argue with me,' Liam murmured. '*Cameron fucking Cope didn't argue.*'

'He figured you meant it.'

And that hurt more than a punch.

'He's not punishing you,' Rob said. 'That's not his MO.'

'I know,' Liam said too fast, a reflex, not a conviction. He drew a breath through his nose, slow, deliberate. 'Did he say anything else?'

Rob studied him. 'He said you were scared.'

Liam closed his eyes. Of course he did. Cam had always been annoyingly precise like that: never calling it weakness, never dressing it up. Just naming it and letting it sit.

'And,' Rob added, 'he said he wasn't running.'
That landed wrong. Not sharp, but heavy.
Liam straightened on instinct, shoulders squaring, spine locking like he'd been corrected mid-inspection. The reaction came before the meaning did. When it caught up, it knocked the breath out of him.

'I didn't want,' He stopped, exhaled, and tried again. 'I didn't want him to leave.'

Rob tipped his head, just slightly. 'Then you might want to tell him that.'

Liam let out a short, humorless laugh. 'And how the fuck am I supposed to do that?'

'Well,' Rob said, picking at the label on his bottle, 'apparently he'll be at Lejeune.'

Liam swallowed. 'But not *now*.'

'No. Not now.'

Liam nodded once. 'Good,' he muttered. 'He deserves better than me panicking all over him.'

Rob snorted softly. 'Jesus, Bobby.' He shook his head. 'You fucking love the guy. It's written all over your goddamn face right now. I know shit's complicated for you - for a whole list of reasons I'm not gonna pretend to understand. But still.' He leaned in just a touch. 'Try. Just a little. Let him see it.'

Liam didn't argue. He stared down at his hands instead, flexing them slowly like he was checking they still worked. 'You think that'll be enough?'

Rob's voice softened, just a notch. 'He wouldn't have called me if he didn't care.'

That did it. That cracked something loose.
Liam leaned back, eyes tracking the ceiling like it might offer answers. 'Caring doesn't mean he'll come back,' he said quietly. 'Maybe I finally fucked him up one time too many. Wouldn't be new.'

Rob shook his head. 'A slip, Bobby. Not a relapse. You're doing better.' He drained his beer. 'And he said he'd be back. Take him at his word.'

Rob let Liam finish his drink before sending him home. He offered to drive; Liam declined. He needed the walk.

The cold worked into his hands, his face — sharp, grounding. By the time he reached the building, the bar noise had burned off, replaced by the familiar thud of his boots on concrete stairs.

The apartment smelled clean; coffee, candles, and the faint trace of Cam's cologne. Still there, but thinning.

Liam shut the door behind him more quietly than necessary.

'*Cam*?' he called, just to be sure.

Nothing answered.
The silence wasn't empty, exactly. It was settled. The TV was off. No music. No hum of a second presence moving somewhere out of sight. Liam stood there longer than he should have, jacket still on, like taking it off would make the truth stick. He set his keys on the counter and moved through the apartment slowly, methodically — clearing rooms on autopilot. Kitchen. Living room. Bathroom.

The bedroom was what really stopped him.

The bed was made. Tight. Intentional. And most damning of all: Cam's duffel was gone.

Liam exhaled sharply through his nose and crossed the room. He sat on the edge of the mattress, boots still on, staring at the folded hoodie left behind: it was his hoodie. The Recon one, he'd given Cam to wear. It was old, and soft from too many washes. But Cam had liked it, and Liam had liked seeing him in it.

He picked it up. It still smelled like Cam. Clean, warm, unmistakable. Liam closed his eyes and pressed it briefly to his face before he could stop himself.

'Fuck,' he whispered, and his chest felt hollowed out, like something essential had been removed with care. Nothing broken. Nothing slammed. Everything erased gently - and that hurt worse.

He backed out of the bedroom and went back to the kitchen, leaning against the kitchen counter, hands braced, breathing shallow until he noticed and corrected it automatically.

In through the nose. Count it out.

A short, humourless laugh escaped him. ‘Yeah,’ he muttered to the empty room as he shrugged off his jacket, flinging it onto a chair. ‘Good job Sullivan.'

He didn’t look at the bedroom again. Instead, he dropped onto the couch: like avoidance dressed up as an impulse. He kicked his boots off and plopped down. The couch was too short. But he'd slept in worse places. He dragged the throw blanket up around his shoulders in an effort to at least get warm, only to he once again kicked in the gut.

It smelled like them.
Like nights spent tangled there: some easy, some charged, some slow and exploratory - but all of them gone now.

He turned onto his side, facing the back of the couch, shifting the pillows in a pointless effort to get comfortable.

Something thumped softly against the upholstery.

Liam froze.

He lifted the pillow properly this time, only to see a paperback lay half-hidden beneath it, spine creased, a Polaroid sticking out near the middle like a careless bookmark. The cover was bent at one corner, pages worn in the specific way books got when they’d been shoved into a bag and taken out again and again. *Cam’s*.

Liam picked it up slowly. It wasn’t anything dramatic: no poetry, no self-help, no confession. Just a beat-up horror novel. Read because it moved, not because it meant something.
Except it did.

The Polaroid slipped loose when he opened it. He caught it on reflex: Cam, Slovacek, McAffey, and a woman Liam recognized as McAffey’s girlfriend all pressed together in a diner booth, all of them smiling like they’d been caught mid-laugh. Cam’s arm slung casually behind Slovacek’s shoulders.
Liam traced the edge of the photo with his thumb.

He closed the book, pulled it to his chest, and held it there like it might bolt.

Eventually exhaustion won, the way it always did: shallow sleep, fractured dreams. Once, he even reached out across the couch cushion beside him. Only to hate himself all over again when he remembered

why the space was empty.

Christmas came and went.
When the New Year rolled in, Liam knew Cam would be back any day: and fought the urge to listen for it at base.

He'd see him when he saw him. He'd apologize. Extend an olive branch. He wouldn't push.

No matter how many times Rob called him a miserable asshole, or Tina looked at him like she was torn between wrapping him in cotton wool and shaking him until sense rattled loose.

But the waiting made him antsy. Irritable - *a fucking prick, according to Rob.* And that was how he ended up back at the bar on a Friday night, game on, Bud Light sweating under his hand. Rob spent half the night socializing with people he'd collected since settling in, while Liam was perfectly content to mind his own damn business.

The stool beside him scraped back, and someone sat down beside him: broad and strong, radiating the kind of barely-contained aggression you learned to clock early or regret later.

Slovacek.

Liam registered the jaw tic, the tight set of his shoulders. This wasn't a coincidence. This was a decision. And in another life, he might've welcomed it.

He took a slow drink. Didn't rise to the obvious dare. 'Slovacek.'

'*Sir*.'

Only Slovacek could make an honorific sound so damn belligerent.

'Something you need?'

'Permission to speak freely, sir?'

'We're not on base,' Liam said evenly. 'Just say whatever you came here to say.'

Instead of words, the punch came fast and mean.

Liam saw it a fraction too late, and didn't duck. The impact snapped his head sideways, white flashing across his vision as he hit the floor hard. Pain bloomed a second later, sharp and familiar. He tasted blood. And his jaw screamed a second later. He got up on instinct.

Fair, his mind supplied distantly, as he got to his feet on instinct.

'Asshole,' Slovacek snarled, red-faced, chest heaving. 'I knew - I knew you were fucked in the head.'

'What do you want me to say, huh? I fucked up. I'll own that - but somehow I doubt he sent you after me like some kind of attack dog,' Liam said, wiping his mouth. 'Thought we knocked the stupid out of you at Bootcamp.'

That did it.

Slovacek came at him again: wild, furious, all blunt force and no brakes. Liam blocked on instinct and took a knee to the ribs that stole his breath. An elbow clipped his shoulder.
They crashed into a table, bottles shattering, shouts erupting around them as they grappled, raw and ugly. Liam hooked an arm, redirected, slammed Slovacek into the bar hard enough to rattle teeth.

Then Rob hit them both like a wrecking ball.

'Enough!' he barked, muscling between them with the confidence of someone who'd always been big, shoving Liam back toward the door. 'Both of you. Outside. Now.'

Two women were there too, grabbing Slovacek, not with strength, but authority. Slovacek snarled but didn't fight them. That told Liam more than anything else.

Outside, the cold air burned his lungs.

'That was fucking stupid,' Rob said, voice hard.

'He deserved it,' Slovacek shot back.

'Didn't say he didn't,' Rob said. 'But you're Marines. You want to bleed, do it in a ring.'

Slovacek jabbed a finger at Liam. 'You don't get to decide what he can handle.'

'Easy,' Rob warned.

'*Nicky*.' The voice cut clean through the noise and Slovacek halted; shoulders locked, jaw grinding as he turned his head.

‘Ana,’ he snapped. ‘Stay out of it.’

Slovacek's sister was small and curvy, with long dark hair. She didn’t raise her voice. Didn’t need to. One hand stayed firm on her brother’s arm as she looked at him: level and unflinching. ‘Cam didn’t tell you his problems so you could punch them.’

Something in that landed. Slovacek didn’t back down...but he stalled.

Rob clocked it immediately. ‘Listen to your sister,’ he said. ‘Cool the fuck down.'

Slovacek breathed hard through his nose, chest still heaving, but he didn’t lunge again. The second woman, tall and blond - his girlfriend, or hers, Liam wasn't sure - grabbed his elbow, murmuring something under her breath, grounding him the way people did when they knew a storm well.

Ana turned then. Her gaze landed on Liam and didn’t slide away. Up close, the resemblance to her brother was obvious: same eyes, same stubborn set to the jaw - but where Slovacek burned, she cut. ‘You’re Staff Sergeant Sullivan,’ she said. Not a question.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

She snorted softly. ‘Don’t do that.’ Then, sharper: ‘Cam didn’t tell Nick your business so he could come swing at you like a damn idiot. Nicky just never figured out how to look out for someone without using his fists.'

Slovacek bristled. ‘Ana-,’

'You don't get to make his decisions for him,' she said not even bothering to look at him.

'Is he here?' Liam blurted out - the look Slovacek shot him was pure disdain.

'What's it to you?'

Ana made a face, but her eyes never left Liam. ‘Cam’s not here,’ she said. ‘He was with us, but he decided to visit Barbara before reporting

for duty.'

Liam swallowed. ‘Is he-,'

'He’s fine,’ Ana cut in. ‘Feelings are a little bruised though. And that's on you.’

That one hit where Slovacek’s punch hadn’t.
Fair. Brutal. *Accurate*.

Slovacek scoffed. ‘All the more reason this clown needs to stay the fuck away from him.'

Ana rounded on him. ‘And you shouldn’t talk like you know what he can handle.’ She looked back at Liam. ‘So if you’re done spiralling and letting everyone else bleed for it - you might want to figure out what you’re going to say when he comes back.’

Liam’s mouth opened. Closed.

‘I am,’ he said finally. ‘Trying.’

'I can vouch for him on that,' Rob said slapping a heavy hand on Liam's shoulder. 'Any advice?'

'Don't fuck it up again - or I'll let Nicky off the leash.'

Rob let out a barking laugh. 'Fair.'

'I'm not a fucking dog, Ana!' Slovacek snapped. before refocusing his attention on Liam. 'I know you Sullivan. I know you're fucked in the head-,'

'Easy there, Slovacek,' Rob said taking a single threatening step forward. 'Or next time you answer to me.'

Slovacek didn't move, he just glared back, undaunted and reckless. 'Don't make me regret waking away tonight without breaking your fucking face - or next time I won't stop,’ Slovacek said, turning away and stomping off.

Three days passed.
Three days of passing off the magnificent bruise on his jaw as a

sparring accident. Three days of replaying every word the Slovaceks had thrown at him. And three days of wanting something to happen and dreading it in equal measure.

The quad outside Battalion was busy in the low, purposeful way of a weekday afternoon: boots on concrete, clipped conversations, the smell of gasoline and coffee drifting in from somewhere Liam couldn't place.

He wasn't looking for Cam. That was the lie he told himself — the same one he told himself every day.

But today was the day he actually saw him: Cameron Cope was at Camp Lejeune. And Liam drank in the sight of him like a man starved: he stood half-turned beside a Staff Sergeant Liam vaguely recognized, posture relaxed but correct, some folder tucked under one arm. He looked… good. Settled into the uniform in a way that suggested he'd earned his place in it and wore it with ease.

Liam's feet were already moving before his brain caught up. He slowed when he got close enough to hear them talking: logistics, maybe. Schedules. Nothing personal. Cam laughed once, brief and restrained, and the sound hit Liam square in the chest.

He stopped a few paces away, willing away any tells. Cam didn't see him at first. But the other Staff Sergeant did: 'Sullivan,' he said, straightening instinctively. 'Staff Sergeant.' His name was Brightman. He was about Liam's age, handsome, and all too aware of it. A stickler for red tape - which made Rob dislike him - but a good Marine all the same.

Liam returned the nod automatically. 'Staff Sergeant.'

Cam turned. For a split second something crossed his face: surprise, dread, something warmer and sharper all at once. Then it was gone, replaced by calm professionalism so clean it almost hurt to look at. 'Staff Sergeant Sullivan,' he said evenly.

'Cope,' Liam replied. Neutral. Controlled, even though his heart was hammering against his ribs. 'Didn't know you'd landed yet.'

'Reported this morning, sir.'

Brightman glanced between them, curiosity mild and harmless.

'I used to be Cope's DI,' Liam said.

That earned him a look. Respectful. Interested. Innocent.

'No shit,' Brightman said. 'Didn't know they let Recon loose on recruits. That must've been one hell of a boot camp.'

Cam's mouth twitched. 'It was… an *interesting* program.'

Brightman laughed. 'Well, if you can handle Sullivan, I'm sure you can handle whatever I throw at you.'

Liam didn't doubt that for a second: Brightman was the balanced and reasonable sort, so just about everything Liam wasn't.

'Cope was a fine recruit,' Liam said. 'I doubt he'll give you any trouble.' Cam didn't react. And Liam let the silence stretch - not long enough to be rude, just long enough to mean something. 'I was gonna grab coffee,' he said, casual. 'Thought I'd see if Cope wanted to catch up. Swap lies about how easy it all was. Mind if I borrow him when you're done?'

To anyone else, it sounded harmless. Nostalgia. Mentorship. Only Cam would know better.Only Cam knew exactly what he was doing.

Brightman smiled. 'We're done for now. And Cope's due a break. So, he's all yours. I'll see you in twenty.'

"Roger that,' Cam said. He waited until Brightman was out of earshot. 'You didn't have to do that,' Cam said quietly.

Liam met his eyes. 'I wanted to,' he admitted quietly. 'I've...I've missed talking to you.'

Cam's jaw tightened. Not anger. Calculation. 'And if I don't want to talk to you?'

Liam hesitated. The idea that Cam still might walk away now hurt more than he'd expected. 'Then I'd respect it,' he said finally. 'And I'd give you space until you don't need it anymore.'

Cam studied him for a long moment. 'Coffee,' he said at last. 'Fifteen minutes.'

It wasn't forgiveness. But it was permission. A chance to clear the air, or at least try to.

Liam nodded once, pulse finally catching up with him. 'My office?'

Cam followed him without another word.

Chapter End Notes

Slovacek has that: "I'll beat people up for you - but don't ask me to talk about my feelings" energy. Which is exactly the kind of energy Sullivan gets.

Chapter 24: Chapter twenty-four

Chapter Notes

The beginning of the end: enjoy!
Or well, I hope you'll enjoy...

The coffee was hot when he wrapped his hands around the mug Liam handed him but he didn't put it down. His hands were cold and sitting across from Liam after what had happened last time was giving him chills; both the pleasant and unpleasant kind.

His inner-self was perched on Liam's desk, legs swinging. *"God he's such a Heathcliff and of course you're an absolute sucker for it."*

"Wuthering Heights? Really?"

His inner-self tipped its head toward Liam, eyebrows raised in a dare. "*Look at him. Could he look any more like something out of a Gothic novel? Brooding. Tragic. Probably about to walk into the moors and self-destruct."*

And honestly, he did have a point.

Liam sat straight, not parade-rest rigid, but too straight to be comfortable. His too-blue eyes were rimmed red with the kind of bone-deep exhaustion that was more than just physical, and all of that Recon sharp focus was fixed on Cam's face like he was waiting for instructions.

And that? That more than anything, set Cam on edge. He hadn't agreed to this just because he'd missed Liam. He had, *of course he had,* but that wasn't the reason. He was here because he needed to see whether the man sitting in front of him was the same one who'd walked away, or someone who might actually stay put.

Cam shifted in his seat, boot nudging the leg of the table. His gaze snagged on the bruise on Liam's jaw - still a mottled purple, but fading yellow at the edges. 'Yeah… I, uh - sorry for that.' He gestured vaguely. 'I didn't ask Slovacek to do that. Didn't ask him to do anything, really...'

Liam's jaw twitched. 'Wasn't like I didn't have it coming.'

Cam didn’t like how easily he said that. Didn’t like how much it sounded like something Liam believed.

'Still,' Cam muttered, rubbing his thumb along the ceramic rim of the mug. 'It wasn’t his business.'

'You’re his friend. His brother. Looking out for you *is* his business.'

Cam’s shoulders tightened at that. He hated that Liam wasn’t wrong. 'You don’t mind he knows?'

Liam shrugged. 'He'd rather eat a bullet than rat you out. He’s the loyal type. So is the sister.'

Cam nodded slowly. 'Ana…she’s, uh, probably moving here.' He took a sip of coffee and immediately grimaced. Too dark. Too bitter. He swallowed anyway. 'Her girlfriend’s graduating soon. She’s applying to a few jobs here. Elementary school teacher.' A faint huff of breath escaped him. 'Of course Heather's great with Nick. Says he has a lot of big feelings you need to talk him through.'

Liam’s mouth curved soft, before he looked down at his hands, fingers laced too tightly together.' Maybe I should talk to her too, huh?'

Cam’s stomach dropped so hard he almost dropped the cup.

"*There it is,*" his inner-self said with a hum. "*The big pink elephant in the room.*"

'I owe you an apology,' Liam said quietly, and Cam felt it in his spine before he processed the words. His shoulders straightened. His grip on the mug tightened. 'For how I handled things. I didn’t leave because of you. I left because I panicked about shit that had nothing to do with you. I didn’t know how to carry that, so I defaulted to the same crap I always pull. That’s on me.'

Cam’s inner voice leaned forward. "*That enough for you?*"

He watched Liam’s throat move when he swallowed. Watched the muscle tick in his jaw. Watched the way he didn’t look away.

“*No*,” Cam answered internally.

"Good."

Out loud, he inhaled slowly, steadying himself. His pulse was loud in his ears. His body had already forgiven him, traitorous thing that it was, leaning forward half an inch, softening without permission. He forced himself back.

'I can't deal with you freaking out and disappearing every time something gets a little complicated,' Cam said, and his voice came out steadier than he felt. 'It's what *Barbara* does, okay? And honestly, I can't have two Barbaras. One is plenty.' He let out a breath that felt like it scraped his lungs on the way out. 'I grew up knowing not to get too attached to things. And I hated it. And I'm not going to live like that anymore, okay?'

He met Liam's eyes then — really met them.
Red. Sad. Open in a way that made Cam's chest ache. Too easy to forgive.

"*Time to stick the landing, Marine,*" his inner-self said staring right at him. *"Are you going to land on your feet, or on your knees?"*

Cam took a deep breath. 'If you want anything from me - friendship, or whatever - I need to see that you don't freak out and walk out the next time things get hard.' His voice softened, but didn't bend. 'Not over nothing.'

The silence stretched. Liam didn't fidget. Didn't interrupt. Didn't defend himself. He just…listened. And Cam saw the way his jaw tightened, the way his nostrils flared, and how his eyes went glassy for a second and a half before he blinked back into reality. Something was moving behind them. Something heavy.

Eventually, Liam nodded once. 'You're right.'

Not defensive. Not sarcastic. Just...tired.

Cam set his cup down carefully because his hands had started to shake. He cleared his throat. 'Ever since boot camp, everything bad between us has been about Guam.' He felt the word sit between them like unexploded ordnance. 'I think I need to know what happened there.'

Liam's eyes flickered, not away, not exactly. But inward. 'You know.'

Cam held his gaze. 'Some things. Not everything.'

Liam's fingers loosened, then tightened again. He stared at the table, jaw working like he was chewing on something metallic. 'It wasn't pretty.'

Cam felt his pulse kick up. 'I kind of already figured as much.'

Liam inhaled slowly. Held it. Released it through his nose. His shoulders dropped a fraction, not relaxed, but resigned. 'I met Major Wilkinson-, *Aaron*, in Guam. He clocked me for what I was pretty much straight away and we...we were a thing. My first real...thing,' he said finally. No drama. No embellishment. 'Not long. But long enough.'

'We didn't do anything...I was careful. In public only thing we ever did together was run. We're Marines - Marines run all the fucking time, no one bats an eye at that.' Liam continued, voice flat in that way that wasn't flat at all. 'But then out comes Robby and he tells me there's fucking *scuttlebutt* - about Aaron, maybe about me too, I didn't even fucking ask I was so terrified.' Cam's throat tightened. He could see it: the weight of the memory pressing against Liam's ribs even now. 'I couldn't lose the Marines, *I just couldn't*,' Liam went on, eyes fixed somewhere past Cam's shoulder, 'so I got the hell out of there, called in some favours, landed the job at Parris Island. And instead of just keeping my fucking mouth shut and coming up with some excuse I-,' He cut himself off. His jaw flexed. 'I told Robby that Aaron was a *faggot*. And that I needed to get out of Guam because he'd made a move on me.'

Cam didn't push. Instead he studied the way Liam's eyes had stopped blinking. No movement. No flinch Just rigid control.

'You told Rob a major had come on to you,' Cam said quietly as the implied horror of that statement settled somewhere deep in his gut.

'I told Robert fucking Maitra who has the protective instincts of a momma grizzly that a major had made a move on me,' Liam said stonefaced, but his tone so sharp it could cut glass. 'He reported him. Of course he reported him - and that was on me.'

There it was. No poetry. No melodrama. Just the truth. Stripped down and ugly.

Cam's chest felt tight. His body wanted to reach across the table. His brain wanted to build a wall.
So he folded his arms instead and offered words instead. 'It wasn't on you - you said so yourself. There were other guys. Wilkinson-, *Aaron* wasn't discharged because of some asshole remark you made to Rob. There was more to it.'

'I helped dig his grave - I handed them the fucking *shovel*.' He sat back in his chair, as if someone had cut the strings holding him upright. 'I did that shit. It's in my pack. And being with you? It made it heavier.'

That landed like a punch. 'What?'

'I can't risk -, I can't let myself sell you out the way I sold out Aaron.' Liam finally looked at him. Fully. 'You matter to me, Cam. You always did. And I can't let risk screwing you over like that.'

'You won't,' Cam said softly.

Liam shook his head. 'I'm a coward.'

In his head Liam Bobby Sullivan had been a lot of things - not all of them flattering - but he'd never honestly thought of him as a coward...

'I don't think you're a coward. You messed up once. Once is not a pattern - once is a slip up, a glitch - did it have some pretty awful consequences? Yes - *definitely*. But that doesn't mean you'll do it again.'

Liam's lip quivered and he caught it with his teeth, eyes staring up at the ceiling, grasping for control. 'You don't know that, Cam.'

'I do,' Cam said, his voice steady but his heart hammering against his ribs. 'And until you realise it's true - we're just friends.' The words hung there. Not punishment. Not cruelty. A boundary and a promised. 'I'm not signing up to be collateral damage because you're still grieving something you did,' his voice didn't rise. It didn't need to. 'You need to figure yourself out, and when you're done with that...maybe we can figure us out.'

Liam absorbed that too. His jaw tightened. But he nodded. 'Okay.'

Not agreement per se, but acceptance.

And for the first time since they'd sat down, Cam felt something shift

inside him: not forgiveness.
But the faint, fragile outline of possibility.

Cam pushed his chair back first. The legs scraped softly against the floor and the sound felt louder than it should have. He stood slowly, palms flattening briefly against the desktop, steadying himself against something that wasn't just physical.

Across from him, Liam rose automatically; muscle memory, matching pace without thinking, and for a second they ended up too close around the corner of the desk. Both facing the door but not quite looking at each other.

'Fifteen minutes are up,' Cam said quietly, more practical than emotional now.

Liam nodded. 'Fifteen.'

Cam reached for the handle and paused. Not long enough to become a moment, just long enough to acknowledge one. Then he opened the door and stepped out. And even though it didn't feel like it, not really, he knew he'd done the right thing.

Settling into Camp Lejeune turned out to be easier than Cam had expected.

After the conversation with Liam had been dealt with, things became… workable. They nodded in hallways, sat across from each other at chow if Rob engineered it, and they talked about safe things: schedules, Brightman's obsession with uniform creases, whatever the mess hall was pretending passed for food. It wasn't warm. Or healed. But Cam didn't have to brace for impact every time Liam walked into a room. And for now, that was enough. Even if sometimes, late at night, "enough" felt suspiciously like settling.

The barracks at Lejeune were the same kind of workable: small, government beige and aggressively practical, but the mattress didn't kill his back and the AC rattled in a soothing kind of way. Slovacek was his roommate, and that was...good. Nick was his friend, for better

and for worse. If he was pissed, he said so - bluntly. And if he cared, he said that too - usually louder, but always with profanity.

His work itself on base was downright good. Cam was good at what he did, and therefore exceeded expectations. Brightman was a good Staff Sergeant. Heaps more particular than Wood had been, and definitely more ambitious. But fair and kind nonetheless; the type of boss who wanted to climb the ladder but wouldn't step on you to get there.

So, all in all, things were good. And because things were good, the weeks slid by. Winter softened into spring. Which was how Cam ended up in a diner on a bright Saturday morning, waiting for Sebastian Vargas.

The place smelled like sugar and grease. Two booths of Marines laughed too loudly near the back while a family's table overflowed with kids and colouring books. Cam had picked a table by the window. The sunlight warmed his skin as he traced shapes in the condensation on his water glass, watching them disappear as quickly as he made them. Temporary. Like most things.

Then Sebastian walked in.
He looked good in the way Sebastian always looked good: sun-warmed skin, easy smile, shoulders loose. His dark hair had grown past his usual into something styled instead of cut. There was a fresh scar at his temple, still a little pink. But Cam knew better than to ask.

'Good to see you, man,' Sebastian said, already stepping into Cam's space. No glance around the room. No calculation. Just a firm, unapologetic hug.

Cam stiffened automatically. Then melted into it. 'Good to see you too,' he said, and meant it. 'How was the hike?' Sebastian and two of his SEAL buddies had made the drive down to Lejeune after a two day hike in Roanoke National Park.

'Awesome. You should try it next leave.'

Cam grimaced. 'Yeah hard pass. I sleep in tents enough at work.'

The waitress took their order.

'Your friends having a good time?' Cam asked.

Sebastian nodded. 'Gary's got two cousins at Lejeune. They're off doing straight white guy shit - something with dirt. Jake's asleep - spent the first half of his leave bonding with his nieces and nephews. Probably wore him out worse than deployment. He'll probably get here in like an hour or two.'

Cam grinned. 'So we should get the gay stuff out of the way now?'

'Something you wanna ask me, Cope?' Sebastian asked quirking an eyebrow.

'Well, in your letters you said that you were seeing *someone* at Little Creek. But you were being awfully vague. So I'm guessing it's definitely a gay thing?'

Sebastian smirked. 'Yeah. His name's Riley. Civilian. Works for Lockheed.'

When Sebastian said the name, there was no hesitation, and Cam felt something twist low in his chest. Not jealousy. Not really. Longing, maybe. What would it be like, he wondered, to have someone say your name without scanning the room first?

'So he's around and understands the whole,' Cam made a vague hand movement, '*discretion* thing? That sounds...really, really nice.'

'Also helps that he's hot and has a nice apartment.'

Cam shot him a look 'Okay now you're just bragging.' Humor was easier than admitting he was hungry for details: hungry for proof that this kind of thing could work.

The waitress brought them their food and they just talked - easy things like Lejeune and Little Creek, Sebastian's family, Riley of course. And Cam relaxed into the ease of speak to someone who didn't require translation without even noticing.

But then of course Sebastian decided to throw a handgranade: 'Ran into Sullivan yesterday.'

The fork slipped from Cam's fingers. It hit the plate with a sharp clang. And Cam flushed three different types of red when several heads turned. And of course Sebastian hadn't missed it either.

'Oh?' He tried for casual, light. Like the name hadn't just knocked the air out of him...and he missed by about a mile.

Sebastian hummed around a mouthful of pancakes. 'Bank's across the street from his place apparently. Think he might have broken some teeth when he spotted me - the man has one angry jaw.'

Cam huffed; he was definitely familiar with the expression Sebastian was describing.

'I told him I was visiting you.'

Cam's grimaced, apprehension crawling up his spine, but he kept his eyes on his plate, his fork stabbing at his pancakes, maybe a little too hard. 'What happened?"

Sebastian smiled slightly. 'He got jealous.'

Cam stopped chewing. *Jealous*. The word did something ugly and hopeful at the same time. It bloomed low in his stomach: not triumph, not exactly. More like vindication. Proof that he hadn't imagined it all. That what they'd had had weight.

'Not the ugly kind,' Sebastian added. 'He didn't make it a problem or anything...just reflex, *you know*? When your body starts something before your brain gets a vote? He looked pretty miserable though. And he asked about you. Didn't like pry or anything...just listened when I said you were doing well.'

Cam leaned back slowly in his chair, exhaling through his nose. He didn't want Liam miserable.
He wanted him whole. It would be easier if he were angry. If he could write Liam off as selfish or cruel. But he'd seen the cracks up close. Seen how tightly Liam held himself together. How fear sat behind his eyes.

Sebastian watched him over the rim of his glass.
'You gonna tell me what happened?' He asked.

'He's got some stuff in his pack,' Cam said. *Stuff*. Like it was just clutter. Not grief and shame and years of flinching away from happiness.

'Bad stuff?'

'I'd say pretty bad, yeah.' Cam said, hands clasped on the linoleum tabletop, food forgotten. Sebastian waited. 'He needs to deal with it,' Cam said finally. 'Or atleast accept it. Before we can be anything.'

'You tried already?'

Cam felt himself flush scarlet and he screwd his eyes shut as he nodded - just once. The memory came back fast and sharp. Hands in his shirt.
Laughter against his mouth. The exact second it shifted, like a door slamming in a house he thought was safe.

'And I'm guessing it didn't work out?'

Cam let out a short laugh. 'It was great. Really great. Until suddenly it really wasn't.'

'Self-sabotage? Because I'm not going to lie to you - he really seems the type.'

'His issues are real. I mean I get why he has them...' he trailed off. 'But he does kind of make things harder on himself than they need to be, you know?'

Sebastian studied him. Brow furrowed in worry or sympathy - Cam wasn't sure, but either way, he fidgeted under the scrutiny. 'I didn't stir shit,' he said finally.

Cam frowned. 'I didn't-,'

'You were thinking it,' Sebastian grinned. 'And it's usually what I do. But dude already looked ready to hit the bottle without me dumping more shit on him. I told him I was here to see you - with my friends, because you're my friend.'

Cam bit his lips as his eyes darted to the ceiling. Worry gnawing at him hungrily. Liam had looked bad enough for Sebastian of all people to worry. And he didn't want to hurt Liam. He didn't want him punished.

'He lightened the fuck up,' Sebastian added. 'Whatever went down between you - he's sorry. And he's trying.'

'You think so?'

Sebastian nodded. 'It's not perfect. Definitely not smooth. But trying.'

Something small and traitorous shifted hopefully, but Cam pushed it down vigorously. Trying wasn't the same as ready. 'It's good,' he said quietly as he wrapped his fingers around his cool drink. 'It's good that he's trying, but it doesn't mean he's got his stuff sorted out.'

Sebastian's smile stayed. 'Good answer. Means you're not an idiot.'

Cam snorted. 'High praise.'

They drifted back to lighter things and the diner noise settling around them, familiar and uncomplicated. And Cam relaxed into the steady reassurance of someone who understood you.

Spending the weekend with Sebastian had been relaxing. Easy and fun, in the same way spending time with Ray and Slovacek was easy. It left him lighter. Happier. Happy enough to go on a morning run

Cam settled into a steady pace along the familiar road skirting the tree line toward the training fields. His breathing evened quickly, shoes striking pavement in a reliable rhythm.

Left. Right. Left. Right.
Predictable.

It was early; the sun just barely peaking out over the horizon and the air still clean with the smell of wet roads and dew. The base was still waking up - and things were as peaceful and quiet as an military base got. That was why he clocked it immediately, the footsteps behind him. He didn't turn at first; plenty of runners used this route, but the cadence synced too cleanly with his own.

Then they slowed.
Not passing. Not falling back. Matching.
Cam glanced sideways, curious - only to lock eyes with *Liam*.

Cam tripped over nothing, arms windmilling to keep his balance while

Liam gave a brief nod without so much as breaking his stride - the absolute picture of cool while Cam fumbled along like an absolute idiot - *typical, so, so typical. God, of course it was him.*
Pushing down his embarrassment, Cam returned the nod and just kept running, extra careful now of where he planted his feet.

They ran like that for a while; quiet company, breath and footfalls gradually syncing in effortless muscle memory. Cam knew Liam could easily overtake him. But he didn't.

And after a long while, Liam spoke, voice even despite the pace: 'Didn't know you ran mornings.'

'First time,' Cam said. 'Just felt like it.'

Liam nodded like that made perfect sense.

They reached the long stretch toward the water. Neither sped up. Cam stole a glance. There was no tension in Liam's jaw. No scanning. No edge. Just loose shoulders, steady breathing, and faze forward.

'I almost turned around when I saw you,' Liam said suddenly. 'But that felt like the easy way out. I'm trying to do less of that.'

Cam's heart did a traitorous little jump. 'Good,' aiming for neutral, though he couldn't stop the small upward pull of his lips.

They kept running. A flock of birds lifted from the grass ahead, scattering into the pale sky.

'I'm not trying to get anything out of this,' Liam said. 'Just didn't want to pretend we didn't used to do this.'

Cam considered that, pace unchanged. 'I know. It's nice.'

Liam huffed, almost a laugh.

They hit an incline. Instinctively, both shortened stride. Still matched. At the top Cam slowed to a walk, hands on hips. Liam stopped beside him; not crowding, not drifting away.

After a moment Liam nodded ahead. 'Same loop?'

Cam's mouth twitched. 'Same loop.'

They started again. Familiar enough to ache just a little.

'I ran into your SEAL friend,' Liam said, his tone even. 'He said he was visiting you.'

Cam glanced at him. 'And?'

Liam exhaled softly. 'I was jealous.' Cam blinked, but Liam kept going before silence could sharpen his words. 'Didn't love realizing that in the middle of my street. Just like I didn't love realizing it in a military camp in Somalia.'

A smile tugged at Cam before he could stop it. 'How'd you handle it?'

'Didn't make it his problem.' A shrug. 'Didn't come looking for you to drag you somewhere private this time either.'

Cam studied him. There was no defensiveness, no fishing for approval. Liam just kept running. 'Sebastian said you behaved.'

'Don't know if that's praise coming from a SEAL,' Liam muttered.

They shared a brief almost-smile.

'Tina said I have the same problem Rob used to have,' Liam said. 'You know, before she whipped him into shape.'

'Oh?'

'I react before I think things through. Recon reflex.' He shrugged. 'Kept doing it, even though I rarely liked the results.'

No self-pity. No excuses either. Just a conclusion.

'Not anymore though, right?' Cam said before he could stop himself.

Liam's mouth twitched faintly. 'Trying.'

'Good,' Cam said, heart suddenly racing harder than the run warranted. The word came out softer than he meant it to. But Liam didn't lean closer, or move away. He just nodded and kept pace. And that, more than anything, felt like progress.

The base was waking up now; traffic humming, voices carrying, people popping up left and right ready to tackle the day. They'd just turned the bend toward the on-base gym when Cam spotted *Slovacek* looming at the edge of the path. Watching. Arms crossed. Expression thunderous.

Cam's stride faltered; not enough to trip, but obvious enough for Liam to notice the slip in rhythm. Liam followed his gaze to where Slovacek stood, unmoving, staring at them like judgment had taken human form.

'Cope!' he barked, gesturing sharply; the universal *we're talking later*. Cam would honestly rather have all of his teeth pulled by a military-issued dentist.

He immediately picked up speed, neck dissappearing into his shoulders, as he fled on instinct, feeling Slovacek's stare drilling into his back.

The silence lasted exactly two strides.

'I think I got you in trouble with the *missus*,' Liam said.

Two more steps. And then Cam broke: a helpless huff escaping before he could stop it. His shoulders shook once, then again, and laughter slipped loose. 'I mean - right? I thought the upside of being gay was less...hormones! But no. Enter my moody straight friend and his judgmental eyebrows.'

Liam laughed too, softer. 'You sure he's straight?'

Cam nodded, laughing harder. 'One hundred percent. He checked after his sister came out.'

'I told you Nick's really into *the don't knock it before you try it philosophy*,' Cam wiped a tear from his eye. 'Some poor guy at a gay bar had a very confusing make-out session with Nicholas Slovacek a couple of years ago.'

Liam chuckle. 'He probably terrified the shit out of him.'

'Or it's the best story he's ever had,' Cam quipped as their laughter faded. Not awkward, just easy, like pressure vented from a sealed space.

'Still don’t get how you two became friends,' Liam said.

Cam shrugged. 'He grew up straight in a worse neighborhood with slightly less white-collar-crime parents. Otherwise, pretty similar childhoods.'

Liam blinked at him. 'One of these days I'm really going to need to hear the story of Barbara Cope.'

Cam huffed. 'Sometimes I don't believe half of the things she's pulled. But at least she wanted me to come home. Nick's mom sold him down the river to keep her boyfriend out of jail.'

Something passed over Liam's face. 'Slovacek really gonna give you hell?'

'Oh absolutely. Nick loves giving people his opinions about as much as he loves the sound of his own voice.'

'I’m sorry.'

Cam shook his head. 'Don’t be. This was… *nice*.' He hesitated, then added: 'Did you even notice we referenced me not being straight like six times? *At work*. And you didn’t look around once?'

For a second Liam froze. He glanced around slowly, and there was no one paying them any attention. When he realised it, he looked back at Cam, the corners of his mouth lifting into an almost proud grin.

Liam’s grin lingered: small, almost private, before he looked ahead and started jogging again. Cam matched his pace automatically.

The path curved away from the gym toward the training fields, quieter here, just the hum of insects and the distant thud of something heavy hitting sand. Their strides synced again without trying as the finished their loop.

Cam stopped first, bending forward with hands on his knees while catching his breath. Liam stopped beside him, breathing still annoyingly even.

'How are you so good at this?' Cam asked accusingly, wiping sweat from his face with his shirt - and the way Liam’s gaze dipped sent a

pleasant thrill up his spine.

Liam shrugged. 'You've gotten way better. You couldn't run for shit when you started.'

'I'll take the compliment,' Cam said and as he shifted to leave, his foot caught slightly on the uneven concrete. It wasn't a real stumble. He would've corrected it easily. But Liam's hand closed around his upper arm anyway. Not grabbing. Not yanking. Just steadying.
Firm, warm pressure through damp fabric, automatic and then immediately *not* automatic, because Liam didn't let go right away.

Cam stilled.

The contact lasted maybe two seconds longer than necessary. Long enough to register. Short enough to still pretend it was practical.

Liam's thumb flexed once before he seemed to realize what he was doing and loosened his grip. But he didn't snatch his hand back like he used to. He just let it fall away naturally. 'You good?' he asked.

Cam nodded, though his brain had stalled somewhere around the point of contact. 'Yeah. Uneven ground.'

'Yeah,' Liam said quietly, as if that explained more than the pavement. He looked around then, gaze unfocused and posture suddenly DI-stiff again. 'I've - I've been seeing someone.'

Cam's stomach dropped painfully and he bit the inside of his cheek before his face could betray him. He felt...hollow, stupid even, so so stupid for never even considering that this outcome was an option.

'Cam,' Liam said, louder now. 'Not - I meant a *therapist*. I'm seeing a therapist.'

The breath Cam had trapped somewhere behind his ribs escaped in a rush. 'Oh. That's… good. That's really good,' he blurted out clumsily, scrubbing a hand over the back of his neck.

'She's one of Tina's clients. I've been seeing her once a week,' Liam stared ahead. 'I told her about Guam. About the way I bolt when I feel cornered. She's been...it's helping.'

Cam smiled, hoping Liam caught it in his peripheral vision. 'I'm glad.'

They started walking then, instead of running. No discussion. Just an unspoken agreement to keep each other company until their paths split.

The day blurred after that. After his talk with Liam, focusing on his job had been damn near impossible - and before he knew it, Cam found himself sitting on his bunk at 2100 hours, staring at the opposite wall while Slovacek paced a trench into the floor between the desk and the door.

'You are,' Slovacek said for the fourth time, jabbing a finger in Cam's general direction, 'fucking *shit* at looking after yourself.'

'I am literally a Marine,' Cam muttered.

'You are a Marine who keeps volunteering for *fucking suicide missions*, is what you are.'

Cam pressed his lips together to hide a smile. Because that was honestly comically accurate.

Slovacek stopped pacing and folded his arms. 'He hurt you. You hightailed it all the way to fucking Jersey. You stopped sleeping. You alphabetized Ana's fucking kitchen cabinets.'

'That was one time.'

'You labeled the fucking salt, *Cope*.'

Cam scrubbed a hand down his face. 'Okay, first of all, the salt and sugar look identical-,'

Nick leaned in, eyes narrowed. 'Are you about to do this again?'

Cam hesitated.

Which was apparently answer enough. Slovacek exhaled hard and dropped onto the chair, elbows on his knees. 'My mom kept forgiving the same fucking shmucks over and over again. You wanna know how that worked out for her? *Neither of her kids still talk to her - that's* how that worked out for her.'

Cam looked down at his hands. Warm pavement. Steady breathing beside him. No scanning. No panic. No disappearing. Just staying. 'Did

any of those shmucks ever actually try to work on themselves?' Cam asked quietly.

Nick threw up his hands. 'You're gonna make me commit a felony.'

'Please don't.'

'I'm serious, dipshit.'

'I know,' Cam said. 'And I appreciate it. I really do. But he's not your dad, Nick. He's never taken a swing at me outside of bootcamp. Liam...he is working on it. Therapy and everything.'

Slovacek grimaced. 'Therapist? Like a fucking shrink? Sullivan's visiting a shrink?' He snorted. 'Always knew the guy was a fucking headcase.'

Cam rolled his eyes.'We're Marines, Nick. We're all insane. At least Sullivan's doing something about it.'

Nick shook his head before he stood up and grabbed his towel. 'I'll believe it when I see it.' He paused at the door. 'And so should you.'

The door shut, and silence settled; the hum of the AC, distant lockers, muffled voices.

Cam leaned back against the wall, as his mind replayed small things on a loop: the old Liam had always been intense, and being near him had felt like standing too close to the ocean: beautiful right until it dragged you under.

But today hadn't felt like drowning.

"*No, today was nice,*" his inner-voice said, stretched out across Slovacek's bed, hands folded behind his head. "*Question is: will tomorrow be nice? Or the day after that?*"

Cam groaned and buried his face in the pillow. "*I know. But you can't just ignore the fact that he's trying. Because he is - he's actually trying.*"

"I know," his inner-self said calmly. "*But trying doesn't always work out, does it? And considering his whole thing is running… how do you know he won't this time?"*

Cam stared at the wall. "*I don't. Guess I'll just have to trust him."*

A pause.

"*Trust*," his inner-self hummed. "*Not traditionally our strong suit. But I get it...he is ridiculously gorgeous."*

"*Devastatingly*."

"*And when things were good…*"

"*They were really good*," Cam finished quietly.

His inner self groaned and pushed upright, looking at him. "*So maybe… just maybe… you don't fling the door open*." Cam waited. "*But you could stop holding it shut with both hands?"*

"*Yeah*," Cam muttered. "*Maybe I could do that*."

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